

Effecting methodological change through a trainer training project: a tale of insider-outsider collaboration

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Introduction

In Iran there is a need for the training of teachers of English in the oral-communicative approach, to keep pace with both Iranian students' desire to speak English and with the needs of Iranian society as a whole.

In this article we reflect on the Iran Trainer Training Project (ITTP), for Iranian ELT professionals, which aims to address this need. We explain how we have gone about introducing practical, interactive training methods to Iranian Master Trainers in an attempt to introduce a cascade of practice-focused methodology to teacher trainers and teachers. We make reference to our own collaboration as 'insider' and 'outsider' on the project, and the benefits of these two perspectives in developing an effective intervention.

Context

Understanding the context of teaching and learning, as Wedell and Malderez (2013) have pointed out, is important before initiating any educational change. Indeed, they call it 'the starting point for change' (p.228). It is for this reason that we start with a brief overview of the current context of ELT in Iran.

English is the foreign language most widely taught in Iran. All students have to take English in secondary schools and universities. There are also many private language institutions teaching English across the country. Despite this popularity, as Talebinezhad and SadeghiBeniss (2005) argue, few public schools and universities have been successful in meeting Iranian students' ever-increasing desire to learn English communicatively, (cited in Aghagolzadeh&Davari, 2014). This has resulted in, as Riazi (2005) says, a high number of private schools and language institutions offering English language at different levels in their curriculum.

Looking back on recent history, as Farhady et al (2010) and Tollefson (1991) note, the Islamic revolution (1979) had a great impact on ELT in Iran. Tollefson believes that the end of English domination was associated with the changing structure of power in Iranian society. Beeman (1986) claims that after the Revolution, English was mostly associated with Western subjugation of the Iranian people. It seems that after the Islamic Revolution, English was, to a great extent, restricted to areas such as diplomacy and science, (Farhady et al, 2010).

In the past two decades, there has been a rapid growth in science and technology in the Iranian context. This has meant that the role of foreign languages, especially English, is now a key factor in educational development. Meanwhile, the anxiety over the spread of western values in Iran through ELT has attracted many Iranian authors to consider ELT as the silent hegemony of the west and call for a movement towards localization (Akbari, 2003; Davari, 2011; Pishghadam and Najji, 2011). For example, Pishghadam and Zabihi (2012: 67) claim that the “West has made every effort to ensure that the English language in its pure British and American forms, along with their specific ideological, cultural, and attitudinal views, are kept as uncontaminated as possible by other localities”. Failing to support their claims with empirical data, they also accuse Iranian ELT professionals as responsible for the marginalization of Iran by showing positive attitudes towards American culture (ibid).

Objectives of Teaching Foreign Languages in Iran

Teaching English as a foreign language has been approved as part of the educational curriculum by the Iranian government. It is also reiterated by the Fundamental Reform Document of Education (FRDE), ratified by Iran Supreme Council of Cultural Revolution in December 2011 (Ministry of Education, 2011). The document sets out various operational objectives and corresponding strategies for Iranian individuals to achieve. Teaching foreign languages is seen as a strategy to achieve the objectives: “provision of foreign language education within the optional (core-elective) section of the curriculum framework by observing the principle of stabilization and enforcement of the Islamic–Iranian identity” (strategy 1-5).

Status of English Language teaching in Iran

According to a report released by the Statistical Center of Iran (2014), there were more than 12 million Iranian students studying at various levels in 2012. Out of this number, more than five million are at the junior and senior high schools. Based on the same report, more than four million students enrolled at both state and non-governmental universities for the same period. To meet these students' needs for English language at secondary and tertiary levels, two main models of TEFL are employed by public schools, universities and private institutions: traditional grammar and the reading-based method, and the oral- communicative approach or communicative language teaching (CLT). The former is mostly practised at public schools and universities while the latter is the core methodology in private language institutions.

Although the principal objectives of teaching English at senior high schools are helping students learn new words, reading comprehension, structures, pronunciation and practising short conversation, as clearly stated in the second-grade book English II, most teachers practise reading, grammar and vocabulary (HosseiniKhah et al, 2014). The new educational system in Iran has started a shift from traditional to communicative methods in junior high schools. Kheirabadi and Alavi Moghaddam (2014) call this reform "the revolutionary process" (p. 231). They, as the main authors of the new textbook series English for Schools (Prospect 1 & 2), have tried to blend communicative language teaching with local topics and culture to enrich the learners' cultural attachment and local identity. They add that the objective of the new series, based on the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) themes and functions, is to help learners achieve B1 level. This series is welcomed by Iranian EFL teachers, although no official report has been released. During the past two years several workshops and seminars have been held by the Ministry of Education to orient and empower teachers to use CLT.

English is mainly used as a vehicle to improve reading ability at universities. English for Specific Purposes (ESP) is practised by English departments at universities across Iran.

Farhady et al (2010) argue that a three-hour ESP course is taught at universities through the translation method to enable students to read and understand professional materials in English. This indicates that oral communication is a neglected skill at tertiary level.

At private language institutions the core methodology follows communicative language teaching approaches. Textbooks such as American File, Top Notch and New Interchange Series are used. For most Iranian learners and teachers, the focus on oral skills in CLT in such private institutions is considered advantageous and effective (Razmjoo and Riazi, 2006). These institutions provide both their novice and experienced teachers with obligatory training courses which include theoretical and practical issues in CLT. However, in a study examining the current teacher training programmes at private schools in Iran, Motallebzadeh (2012) argues that the “major principles underlying such programmes are developed based on the EFL teachers’ and teacher trainers’ preferences (p.90).” He concludes that teacher training programs follow a trainer- centered mode and have little room for students’ or trainees’ needs. He also maintains that such programmes emphasise the development of good EFL teachers rather than good EFL learners.

Our brief overview, then, shows a complex and shifting context, in which oral communication is of increasing importance

Current models of teacher training/education

According to Wallace (1991), there are three popular models of teacher training or education: the Craft Model, the Applied Science Model, and the Reflective Model. In the traditional Craft Model, trainees work closely with experienced or master teachers and learn from them by observation, instruction and practice. This model, as Christodoulou (2010) claims, lacks reflection on progress and professional development. The applied science model focuses on knowledge and skill transferred from trainer to trainees and gives rise to the metaphor of teacher educator as transmitter of knowledge (Swan 1993:242). The reflective model helps trainees add experience to their process of self-

development. This model looks at the teacher educator as “catalyst, collaborator, and facilitator”, (ibid).

Recently, Kumaravadivelu (2012) has proposed the Modular Model, consisting of five modules: knowing, analyzing, recognizing, doing, and seeing (KARDS). According to this model, local contextual factors should determine both the goal and content of teacher education programs. He argues that local practitioners should “take up the challenge, build a suitable model, and change the current ways of doing language teacher education” (p 129). He sees sustained conversation and constructive criticism carried out in a collaborative spirit as the principal components of professional development.

Analysing teacher training programs in Iran, the craft and applied science models are the most prominent, (Motallebzadeh, 2012). The type of training courses currently offered in universities, teacher training centres and language institutions emphasize ELT knowledge transmission and shaping EFL teachers through imitation of a master trainer (ibid). Due to the rapid changes brought by new technology and new textbooks in public schools, teacher training programmes in both public and private sectors require a shift from the craft model to more reflective and modular modes.

The ITTP project

Project aims, activities and structure

The ITTP project began in late 2011, so, at the time of writing, the project is three years old. The aims of the project are to train cohorts of teacher trainers to deal with the changing context of ELT in Iran, and deliver effective teacher training courses. The ultimate aim is to enable public-sector teachers to teach students to communicate in English.

The project has a number of strands. It is a cascade training project, involving the training of a number of cohorts of Iranian Master Trainers (MTs) and of Iranian teacher

trainers (TTs). The first cohort of MTs is now involved in training the next cohort, with the support of international consultants. MTs are trained for 55 hours face-to face. Once trained, the MTs then select and train their own cohorts of teacher trainers in Iran. These teacher trainers are then assessed, both by MTs and by international consultants, using a set of criteria specifically devised for the ITTP project. Once teacher trainers pass the assessment, they are able to deliver their own teacher training courses to teachers in Iran. The teacher training course they deliver has been written by a group of 10 Iranian materials writers who have been trained as part of the project.

In addition, there is online support for MTs and TTs on a VLE (Virtual Learning Environment). The platform is used to deliver Continuous Professional Development (CPD) to participants, in the form of professional development topics. These topics are sometimes chosen by the international consultants and sometimes by the trainers. Each topic runs for two or three weeks. They are usually training topics such as “How to design and plan an in-service training course”, or “How to evaluate an in-service training course.” The discussions are facilitated by the Iranian MTs with some support from the consultants. The participants (all teacher trainers) take part in the discussions and tasks on a voluntary basis and are assessed through participation. At the time of writing, over 100 trainers from all over the country are signed up for the VLE.

To sum up this description, the project structure is multi-layered. These layers overlap. There are MTs, materials writers and teacher trainers. The MTs train teachers to become teacher trainers. The teacher trainers deliver the workshops designed by the materials writers. Some materials writers are also teacher trainers or MTs. All are supported online by structured continuing professional development discussions. See Figure 1 below.

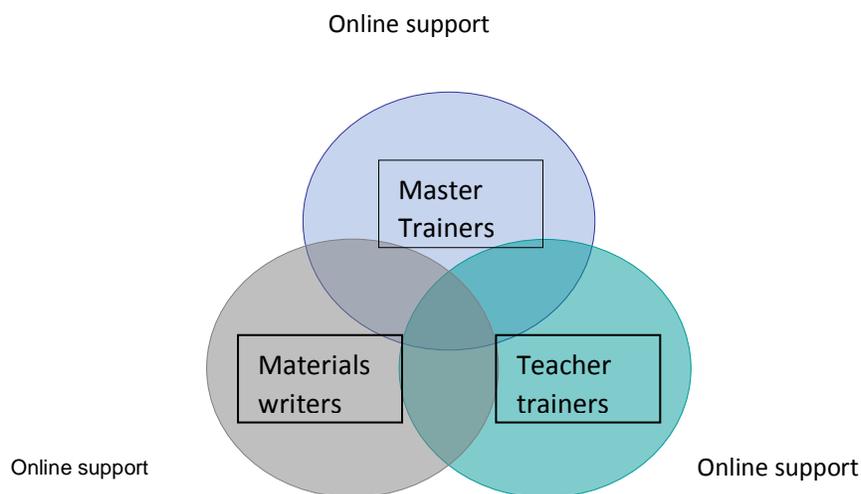


Figure 1: The ITTP Project

Project strategies

In the ‘Context’ section above, we mentioned that the practice of ELT in Iran falls into two main categories, the traditional grammar and reading-based method, and the oral-communicative approach, sometimes known as communicative language teaching (CLT).

In strategizing the ITTP project, we were mindful of the need not only to fully understand the context, but also to find a methodological way forward that did not totally sideline the knowledge and skills of the Iranian context. Holliday (1994), writing about international projects such as ITTP, explores the BANA –TESEP dichotomy. BANA is ‘that which is oriented towards the private sector in Britain, North America and Australasia’. TESEP is

an acronym that comes from Tertiary, Secondary, Primary, as 'state education in the rest of the world,' (Holliday 1994;pp.12-13). Holliday argues convincingly that methodologies created in BANA contexts do not readily transfer to TESEP contexts, and that there is a power differential between the two, with TESEP becoming second-class as it is forced to make unsuitable adaptations. The widespread attempt to introduce the communicative approach in TESEP contexts is one example of this. His discussion of 'tissue-rejection,' where project innovations do not 'take' because of deep-seated cultural and contextual differences, is a familiar scenario.

The international consultants' background in BANA, with Communicative Language Teaching as their main frame of reference, clearly gives them a certain cultural perspective on teaching and learning, and on the roles of teachers. It predisposes them towards what Holliday (1994:53-54) calls the 'learning group ideal', the 'notion of the optimum interactional parameters within which classroom language learning can take place'. From their cultural perspective, the 'learning group' is the best way to achieve what Holliday calls 'process-oriented, task-based, inductive, collaborative communicative ... methodology.'

Whereas the BANA context tends to start from practice, and holds process in high regard, in the Iranian context, theory and content have a high status. One danger, then, particularly in training situations, is what Maingay (1997) has called 'a lack of awareness of underlying assumptions' (1997;p.120).For this reason, it has been our intention in ITTP to create sustained conversation and collaboration between the 'insiders', or Iranian trainers, and the 'outsiders'-the international consultants. It is our belief that a "learning conversation" (Argyris 1992, P 53) between insiders and outsiders can create a positive and fruitful atmosphere for a teacher training or education model to support development. This insider-outsider dialogue and collaboration is the linchpin of our overall project strategy.

With all this in mind, we have put some strategies into place in the ITTP project to try to avoid the imposition of one set of methodological assumptions, deriving from a specific context, onto a totally different context. We now outline some of these strategies.

Overall

We have had to work within the limitations of a classical cascade project, since the 'outsiders', or international consultants, in this project have not had access to participants within Iran itself. Within these limitations, we have tried to find ways of co-creating project outputs as much as possible.

Training and Methodology

1. We have included theory in the MT training courses, often in the form of short pieces of input or readings.
2. We have included sessions which attempt to raise awareness of participants' understandings of content and process.
3. We have included daily reflection in the training courses as a way of observing how participants are processing the methodology they are experiencing.
4. Micro-training and preparation for micro-training makes up to 50% of training courses. This is another way of observing how participants are processing methodological input.
5. From the very first level of the cascade, Iranian MTs have worked alongside international trainers. This has enabled better transference, as Iranian trainers have been able to communicate needs, interpret, and localize the ideas and methodologies of the international trainers/consultants.
6. Supervision has decreased over time, so that we are now at the point where Iranian MTs are in charge of Master Training courses, with minimal 'outside' input.
7. Though working from a timetable drawn up in advance, we have often changed the timetable as we go through the courses as both 'sides' perceive emerging needs.

Materials Development

1. Materials Development was led by Iranian trainers/materials developers and supported by the international consultants. The resulting course is something which Iranian trainers are comfortable delivering.

Assessment

1. Assessment of teacher trainers is always done by a team of Iranian and international assessors co-operatively.
2. Teacher trainers are assessed by practical examination, and by feedback from the MTs who have trained them in-country.

Online Support

1. MTs facilitate most of the discussions on the VLE.
2. The discussions are mainly about applying ideas, methods and techniques within the specific, individual Iranian contexts of the participants.

Reflection

ITTP, as a context-sensitive project, is revealing how effectively a blended model of trainer and teacher development can be successful in the Iranian context. The project has benefited from various features of the applied science model, the reflective model, and the modular model. Moving from feeding to leading and showing to throwing (McGrath, 1997) is one the major highlights of the training model.

In addition, the collaborative role of insiders and outsiders has significantly affected the success of the project by developing learning or dialogic conversation between Iranian

Master Trainers and the international consultants. The VLE, as the main platform for online communication among trainers and consultants, has been shown to be an effective mode for CPD.

Meanwhile, the focus on loop input throughout the whole project is a strength. Loop input, coined by Woodward (1986) is a “specific type of experiential teacher training process that involves an alignment of the process and content of learning (Woodward 2003, P. 301)”. Through successive training courses, Iranian trainers have become more aware of process and its relationship to content, and of the process options example involved in training sessions. This has also encouraged reflection on the balance between content and process among teacher trainers at all levels of the cascade.

Conclusion

The ITTP project is still in progress, but we have already seen significant successes in the way that Master Trainers and teacher trainers are engaged and empowered through the project. 12 Master Trainers are running their own face-to-face courses in-country. The number of courses run varies, but on average the teacher trainers deliver courses to 30-50 teachers a year. The average length of their course is five days (c.30 hours), but some have run longer versions part-time to suit their participants' schedules.

MTs are also providing online CPD for groups of teacher trainers through the VLE. At this time there are some 100 participants logged into the VLE. 92 Iranian teacher trainers have passed the assessment process and are able to deliver the teacher training course in Iran. Two Iranian Master Trainers from the initial Master Training cohort of 12 are about to deliver the next 55-hour face-to-face Master Training. Capacity building is happening in a real and measurable way.

We have been able to assess the impact of the training done by MTs in-country by the performance of teacher trainers at assessments. We can then give feedback to Master Trainers in order to modify training on an ongoing basis. Because of restrictions

mentioned above, impacts on teachers have not yet been meaningfully assessed, and clearly this will be of paramount importance in the final assessment of the success of ITTP. As the final users of the project are the teachers and their target students, it seems necessary to design a quasi-experimental or a correlational research.

We hope that there are a number of strategies and outcomes in this project which will aid sustainability. Surely the most important achievement so far is the development of a large group of professionals who have become engaged in the project and have shown a willingness to contribute to ELT in their home context.

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