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Teachers as presenters at continuing professional development seminars in the English-as-a-foreign-language context: ‘I find it more convincing’

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Abstract: With a growing awareness of the limitations of a transmissive mode of education and a one-size-fits-all approach to teacher education, teachers’ active involvement is increasingly recognized as a crucial component of their continuous professional development (CPD). In many EFL (English as a foreign language) contexts, however, CPD is still largely built on the premise of knowledge transmission and knowledge consumption. The present study seeks to explore how EFL teachers can be made to play a more active role by participating as presenters at CPD seminars, as well as the ways in which such a mode of CPD can promote teacher learning. Using questionnaire and email interview data from 166 seminar participants and 4 teacher presenters respectively, the study shows that opportunities for teachers’ knowledge sharing and production at CPD seminars can enrich teacher learning. The paper concludes that a more robust form of teachers’ CPD should see teachers play a much more active role than what is usually allowed in CPD activities that are dominated by the traditional training paradigm built on knowledge consumption.

Introduction

Professional development is the cornerstone of teacher professionalism and quality. In different parts of the world, such as the USA, Australia and Hong Kong, there has been a significant investment of effort in continuing professional development (CPD) programs to help improve teacher quality, not only to fulfill society’s expectations of the teaching profession, but also to meet the changing needs of students. Whether individual teachers’ participation in CPD activities arises from an interest in lifelong learning, a sense of moral obligation, a felt need to enhance professional competence and to keep abreast of recent developments in their field of work, the need to comply with mandatory government requirements, or for career advancement (Golding & Gray, 2006; Jasper, 2006), CPD is seen to be a foundational element in teachers’ development (Luke & McArdle, 2009).

In the English-as-a-foreign language (EFL) context, different aspects of paradigm shift in second language teacher education (Jacobs & Farrell, 2001) have rendered CPD urgent for in-service teachers, who are largely influenced by traditional models of teaching (Lau, 2006; Shang, 2010). The increased emphasis on the role of

the learner (rather than the teacher), the learning process (rather than the product), the social nature of learning (rather than learners as decontextualized individuals), learner diversity as a resource (rather than an impediment), learning as a lifelong process (rather than exam preparation), assessment for learning (rather than of learning) etc. (see Jacobs & Farrell, 2001) has made it necessary to zero in on EFL teachers' CPD. Given that published research has demonstrated that professional development can impact positively on educational processes and outcomes (Fullan & Hargreaves, 2002), how teacher learning can be enriched through CPD in EFL settings is a subject that takes on new significance.

Just as teaching in EFL contexts is dominated by the transmissive mode (Lau, 2006; Shang, 2010). CPD activities for EFL teachers are equally influenced by traditional models of knowledge transmission and knowledge consumption (Hayes, 2000). While research has demonstrated the value of CPD that actively involves practicing teachers in the process of learning (Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin, 1995; Hargreaves & Fullan, 1998; Kerka, 2003; Muijs & Harris, 2003; Sparks & Loucks-Horsley, 1990), few studies in EFL contexts have focused on how the teacher role can be more fruitfully utilized in CPD activities to promote teacher learning. This provides an impetus for the present study, which seeks to explore how EFL teachers in Hong Kong can be made to play a more active role by participating as presenters at a CPD seminar, and how such a mode of CPD can foster teacher learning in a professional learning community. As the teacher educator who invited the participating teachers to speak at the CPD seminar described in the paper, I saw my role as not only the organizer of the seminar, but also a mentor and facilitator. The study, therefore, can shed light on the potential of partnership between teacher educators and frontline teachers in developing strong CPD programs that are relevant to the needs of practicing teachers.

Continuing professional development and teacher learning

CPD is realized in a number of different modes, including short courses, degree upgrading courses, participation in CPD seminars/workshops, conference attendance, school/classroom-based research, and partnerships with universities or external consultants. Timperley et al. (2007) delineate the different types of learning made possible by the various modes of CPD, such as listening/watching, being observed/receiving feedback, engaging with academic/professional readings, discussing teaching with critical friends/experts, and discussing own theories of teaching. These different modes of CPD place different emphases on the teacher and learner role, the process as well as the context of learning. Take seminars, the focus of the study, as an example. My experience as a teacher educator in an EFL context suggests that seminars as a mode of CPD tend to be perceived as teacher-active and learner-receptive, where university teachers or teacher educators give upfront presentations, followed by comments or questions from the audience. Such a mode of CPD is built on a simplistic view that regards university-based teachers as knowers and givers, and frontline teachers as passive recipients of knowledge. This polarization of teacher and learner roles is problematic because university teachers are likely to be less in touch with the realities of the classroom than frontline practitioners, and their understanding of students' needs, the constraints of teachers' work contexts, and the feasibility of innovative ideas in real classroom contexts may not be as thorough as that of practicing teachers. Instead of receivers of knowledge, teachers

can be “generators of knowledge” (Farrell, 2007a, p.16). They can bring useful resources to solve the problems teachers face (Hayes, 1995). Thus, there is a case for teacher educators and practicing teachers co-presenting in CPD seminars.

Involving teachers as active participants in CPD seminars can facilitate the process of teacher learning, which does not result from merely having teacher educators impose new ideas, new theories or new methods on teachers, since learning is a constructivist process during which teachers reshape their own knowledge, beliefs, and practices (Johnson & Golombek, 2002). Such a process cannot easily take place within a transmissive mode dominated by teacher educators. With increasing awareness of the situated nature of learning (Wenger, 1998), more recent models of CPD challenge the traditional, context-independent mode of teacher learning (Burbank & Kauchak, 2003; Little, 1993; Vescio et al., 2008) predicated on the one-size-fits-all principle. A more participatory mode of CPD, on the other hand, draws upon teachers’ own practical knowledge and takes into account the myriad of contextual factors that influence their work (Burbank & Kauchak, 2003; Johnston & Kirschner, 1996). CPD seminars that empower teachers and see them play a more prominent role, therefore, can help facilitate the learning process. While it is not merely a matter of who is presenting in CPD seminars that makes the difference, the process of teacher learning can be enhanced by having teachers engage in professional sharing and critical reflection and by helping them connect knowledge to unique contexts (Darling-Hammond, 2006). As teachers take a more active role in their CPD by engaging in professional sharing with their peers, they also build a collaborative culture and foster learning in professional learning communities (Lieberman, 1994; Starkey et al., 2009; Vescio et al., 2008; Wong & Tsui, 2007). Based on this premise, this study aims to find out how the process of teacher learning can be enriched through a CPD seminar that features frontline teachers’ presentations, in which teachers share their experiences and problems on the theme explored in the seminar, in addition to input by the teacher educator.

Continuing professional development for English teachers in Hong Kong

In recent years, the Hong Kong government has put a great deal of emphasis on upgrading teacher professionalism (SCOLAR, 2003). With lifelong learning as part and parcel of teachers’ CPD, it is stipulated that school teachers should accumulate 150 hours of CPD over a three-year cycle, with CPD covering a wide range of activities such as attendance at seminars, postgraduate or in-service teacher education courses, school-based consultancies, and partnerships with universities. Over the past few years, numerous CPD seminars on a wide range of topics have been offered by universities and the education ministry in Hong Kong, mainly to equip teachers with pedagogical skills to cope with English language education reforms. To name but a few, topics for CPD seminars include language arts, drama, poetry, short stories, project learning, task-based language teaching, assessment for learning, school-based assessment and other topics pertinent to the new senior secondary curriculum implemented in 2009 in all Hong Kong secondary schools (e.g. learning English through social issues, sports communication and workplace communication).

Despite a growing awareness of the important role teachers should play in their own learning, the majority of CPD activities undertaken by Hong Kong English teachers tend to relegate them to passive receptacles of knowledge. As in similar EFL contexts, CPD seminars that involve practicing English language teachers as

presenters are not very common. The study is predicated on the belief that teachers themselves have valuable knowledge and experience to share in CPD seminars and that their potential contributions to teacher learning can be more fully utilized (Atay, 2006; Burbank & Kauchak, 2003). In the area of feedback in writing, the topic of the CPD seminar reported in this article, issues about how teachers should respond to student writing, what can be done to reduce teachers' workload, and how students can be helped to involve more actively in the assessment process are knotty questions that have intrigued writing teachers for ages (Author, 2009; Ferris, 2003; Hairston, 1986). Rarely, however, do teachers from different contexts venture beyond anecdotal experience sharing and have a chance to get together to listen to other teachers talking systematically about their experiences and problems. With this purpose in mind, the study seeks to explore how teachers themselves can contribute to CPD seminars as active agents - i.e. in the capacity as guest speakers, and how teacher learning can be promoted through such a mode of CPD. Given the shortage of research on teacher learning in teacher-oriented CPD activities for EFL teachers, this study serves to fill an important gap in existing CPD research.

The study

Research question

The study was guided by the following research question: In what ways can EFL teachers' active participation as presenters in CPD seminars promote teacher learning? 'Teacher learning' in the study refers to the learning on the part of both the seminar participants and the teacher presenters.

CPD seminar in the study

In June 2009, I held a CPD seminar on feedback in writing at a Hong Kong university. The seminar was targeted for primary and secondary teachers of English, particularly those in a leading position in schools (e.g. English department heads or senior teachers of English). The rationale of the seminar was that Hong Kong teachers, like many teachers in other parts of the world, are spending a significant amount of time marking student writing but they feel that their efforts are generally ineffective. The aim of the seminar was to help teachers think outside the box, challenge their existing assumptions about feedback in writing, and help teachers re-conceptualize feedback in terms of what happens before, during and after feedback (see Author, 2009). The seminar, which lasted for two hours, consisted of three parts. In the first part, I gave a 45-minute presentation on the topic, first outlining ten perspectives to help teachers critique conventional feedback approaches, and then helping teachers consider feedback delivery in terms of the pre-, during- and post feedback stages. My presentation was followed by a 40-minute presentation by a panel of three secondary English teachers (Teachers A, B and C), one primary English teacher (Teacher D), and one retired primary school principal with English language teaching experience. The final part of the seminar was devoted to questions and answers, of which the researcher and the guest speakers jointly took charge.

The teacher presenters

Since the paper focuses on practicing teachers as presenters, the retired principal is excluded from the study. The four participating teachers, all Cantonese speakers, had teaching experience ranging from three to six years at the time of the study, and all of them had just completed an MA course on 'Reading and Learning' that I taught. The teachers were selected because of the insights they demonstrated in classroom discussions and/or their term papers on the MA course.

Pre-CPD seminar preparation

Before the seminar, I provided the guest speakers with a list of questions about the issue of feedback and assigned to different topics. I suggested they each share their insights and experience regarding the assigned topic in less than eight minutes each at the seminar. About a week before the seminar, I invited them to a preparatory meeting during which the teachers shared their preliminary thoughts on the issues they were to talk about. The session lasted about an hour, with the teachers participating actively by sharing with the group what they planned to cover in the seminar and eliciting comments and suggestions from the group. At the end of the session, the teachers all said that they were less nervous about having to speak at the seminar.

Procedure and data collected

At the end of the seminar, the participants were asked to complete a questionnaire (see Appendix 1), which consisted of five likert-scale questions about the usefulness of the seminar and two open-ended questions about what they liked most and least about the seminar. A total of 166 questionnaires were returned. After the seminar, I conducted an individual email interview with the teacher presenters, seeking their views and perceptions about their participation in the seminar. Together these two sources of data shed light on the research question.

The quantitative data of the questionnaires were subjected to analysis using SPSS, yielding mainly descriptive data. Responses to the open-ended questions were collated and categorized to identify the seminar participants' views of the usefulness of the panel discussion, shedding light on the research question. As for the guest speakers' email interview data, they were read and re-read to identify commonly emerging patterns (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) regarding the guest speakers' views on the benefits of their participation in the panel discussion. Through data comparison, themes that throw light on the research question were identified.

Profile of seminar participants

Of the 166 participants who returned the questionnaire, more than half (55%) taught in secondary schools and 42% in primary schools (the remaining being tertiary teachers). Thirty-four percent of the school teachers were English department heads. The participants' teaching experience was varied, with 23.5% having less than five years' experience, 21.1% with six to ten years, and over 40% with more than ten years of teaching experience.

Findings

Data gathered from the questionnaire data and the qualitative email interview reveal how practicing teachers, as guided by the teacher educator, can enhance teacher learning in CPD programs in three important ways.

Relevancy

Thirty-four per cent of the open-ended responses (15 out of 44) (about what the participants said they liked most about the seminar) included positive words such as “inspiring”, “useful”, “practical”, “convincing”, “helpful” and “encouraging”, which all point to the relevancy of the seminar. Some of the quotes are as follows:

The experiences shared by the teachers are useful.

The guest speakers’ panel discussion is very useful as they are frontline teachers and their suggestions are very practical and encouraging.

Guest speakers can address the concerns of teachers and give practical suggestions.

The general feeling of relevancy of the ideas shared by the teacher presenters was corroborated by the quantitative data of the questionnaires, as shown in the following:

- the guest speakers understood their concerns (92.7% agreeing; mean – 4.3 out of 5),
- they had provided practical ideas on the topic (77.1% agreeing; mean – 4.0);
- the panel discussion had enriched their understanding of their roles as writing teachers (75.9% agreeing; mean – 3.9),
- the panel discussion was stimulating (78.9%; mean – 4.0), and
- they had benefited a lot from the panel discussion (69.9% agreeing; mean – 3.9).

The participants appreciated the fact that through the teacher presenters’ sharing, the CPD seminar was able to address the needs and concerns of the teachers, since the ideas were shared by frontline practitioners with authentic experience in teaching writing and marking student writing. Eleven per cent of the participants’ open-ended responses was about the seminar being “real”, as the word “real” was used five times out of a total of 44 responses – e.g. “real sharing” and “real problems they are facing every day”. The significance of having real teachers talking about real experiences was underlined by one participant: “Very valuable in putting writing into the real context and providing some actual solutions”.

Just as the seminar participants felt the relevancy of the CPD activity, the teacher presenters found the strategies shared in the seminar practical, useful and credible as they had been tried out by frontline teachers. Teacher A wrote in the email interview: “I find it more convincing. Things being presented are more practical and less theoretical”. Teacher B further added that the frontline teachers’ first-hand experience could provide more convincing evidence for the feasibility of the ideas introduced: “It is often criticized that innovative ideas are not practical. As frontline teachers have practical experience, they are likely to persuade others that the ideas are worth trying”. Overall, the findings suggest that teachers’ professional learning could be enhanced when the professional development experience was considered real and relevant to their work.

Professional sharing in a learning community

The CPD seminar provided a valuable opportunity for professional sharing and exchange among teachers on a topic highly pertinent to their work, which would not have been possible had the seminar been run in a traditional mode without teachers' active involvement. In the open-ended questionnaire responses, the idea of professional or experience sharing was mentioned fifteen times (i.e. 34%) as something they liked most about the seminar. From the professional sharing, teachers found that they were not alone in the problems they faced. They also learnt that the felt need for a change in the way teachers marked student writing was shared by colleagues working in other contexts. One teacher wrote: "It is happy to see that so many teachers agree that there should be a change in marking compositions". Through listening to their peers, they were also exposed to alternative feedback approaches and encouraged to engage in critical examination of their own practice (Burband & Kauchak, 2003). Ten of the open-ended questionnaire responses (i.e. 23%) referred specifically to the usefulness of the teachers' sharing of process pedagogy and peer evaluation – e.g. "very inspiring suggestions on peer editing and process writing" and "the sharing of process writing ... is very convincing and helpful" (though some participants pointed out the lack of time for the teacher presenters to share concrete examples used in their schools, like how they implemented focused marking, peer feedback, and process writing). By including the voices and experiences of teachers, the CPD seminar gathered teachers together in a professional learning community (McLaughlin & Talbert, 2001; Servage, 2008), in which their needs and interests were represented. One participant wrote: "Was very happy that all levels were represented (often primary is left out)". The representation of different needs and interests through the teacher-active seminar was able to enrich teachers' professional learning, which would not have been possible had the seminar been dominated by the teacher educator.

The seminar participants' views were shared by the teacher presenters, who treasured the opportunity of professional sharing afforded by the seminar. Teacher B remarked: "As teaching is highly contextual, different frontline teachers can share their unique experience in different schools. This can lead to professional dialogues". The multiple voices from teachers working in different contexts made the professional sharing particularly helpful. Teacher C wrote in the email interview:

Frontline teachers know a lot that the management level doesn't know.

In schools, frontline teachers dare not voice their opinions and therefore the management level never knows the real picture. This panel discussion is especially good because the parties in the discussion represent different roles and so the audience could be exposed to different voices.

The findings show that teachers' active involvement in CPD seminars is able to maximize learning for not only the teacher presenters but also the teacher participants.

Knowledge generation for teacher presenters

For the teacher presenters specifically, through their active participation in the CPD seminar as guest speakers, they played the role of knowledge generators (Farrell, 2007a) rather than knowledge consumers, which helped them develop a deeper understanding of the issues addressed in the seminar. The preparatory meeting held a week before the seminar started them thinking about the issues that would need to be

addressed at the seminar. Teacher B said that before the seminar he went to the library to read up on peer feedback, an area he talked about at the seminar. He said:

I borrowed some books from the library and tried to read through the literature again. I found that peer feedback should have an important value in teaching and learning. However, it is often not practiced in many classrooms. I was wondering why.

After his library research and critical examination of the issue of peer feedback, he said: "I have reflected on my own teaching much more deeply than ever". While preparing for the seminar, similarly, Teacher D reflected on her practice and developed a richer understanding of the issue of feedback. She wrote: "I got the chance to reflect on the current practice at my school when I was preparing for the seminar". Such enriched understanding was found to be empowering. Teacher B remarked: "I have developed much more confidence in the teaching of writing in a new approach". Specifically the question and answer session at the seminar gave teachers a chance to obtain immediate feedback from the audience. Teacher D felt this gave her some useful idea about her own teaching: "I can get some feedback from the teachers and improve on what I am currently doing". Concluding the experience, Teacher C wrote: "If I had not been to the seminar, I bet I wouldn't have understood the issue so much". The findings show that the teachers' involvement in the CPD seminar had transformed them from their normal submissive role as passive recipients of knowledge into active producers of knowledge. Such knowledge production enabled the teachers to develop deeper insights into their own teaching.

Discussion and implications

The seminar in the study was perceived as relevant to the needs of frontline teachers as the participants felt that the teacher presenters understood and shared their concerns and gave practical suggestions to help them re-think their practice. The findings show that teacher presenters can play the role of 'generators of knowledge' (Farrell, 2007a, p.16) and facilitate a context-dependent mode of teacher learning. Though a one-off event, the CPD seminar was able to bring teachers together to engage in professional sharing and exchange, as in a professional learning community (McLaughlin & Talbert, 2001) or a teacher development group (Farrell, 2008), where teachers were helped to reflect on the issue of feedback more deeply together with a community of peers. The participants found the teachers' experience sharing encouraging and felt good about being represented by the teacher presenters. Thus, teachers' active involvement in their own CPD was able to bring the goals and content of the CPD seminar more in line with the professional needs of teachers (Hu, 2005), which was more likely to enhance the transfer value of the professional development activity (Knight, 2002).

Although claims about generalizability are impossible with limited data from 166 teachers and four teacher presenters participating in a single seminar, a number of important implications can be drawn for teachers' CPD, not only for CPD seminars specifically but also for CPD activities in general. First, the study suggests that even in EFL contexts where teachers typically play a submissive role, they can benefit from CPD built on a participatory model. A more robust form of CPD for EFL teachers should see them play a much more active role than what is usually allowed in CPD activities dominated by the traditional training paradigm. Teachers can be encouraged to organize school-based CPD seminars/workshops, where they present the ideas they

have learnt from various CPD activities at the school or district level, so that participation by a relative few teachers in a single CPD activity can achieve a ripple effect among a larger number in schools. Such a participant-driven mode of CPD can enrich teacher learning and help them develop a stronger sense of ownership of their own professional development. Teacher educators can have a crucial role in teachers' CPD, playing the role of an organizer, a mentor and/or a facilitator of teacher learning. In CPD seminars, for instance, teachers with different experiences and from different contexts can be invited to share ideas and discuss problems, in collaboration with teacher educators. Teacher educators can also conduct collaborative action research with practicing teachers, serving as advisors as well as critical friends.

Second, the notion of the professional learning community in teachers' CPD is worth further exploration. The findings show that teachers' professional development is effective "when it is collaborative and collegial" (Servage, 2008, p.63). Teachers need "a community to sustain support and learning" (Klein, 2008, p.85), and that effective CPD should respond to the needs of teachers and students in specific contexts (Dymoke & Harrison, 2006; McLaughlin & Talbert, 2001; McLaughlin & Talbert, 2006; Libermann & McLaughlin, 1992). In Hong Kong and other similar EFL or educational contexts, teachers work largely in isolation. The study suggests that a participatory mode of CPD provides opportunities for teachers to share good practices, ask questions, understand the problems other teachers face, and develop new insights into their own teaching. In a professional learning community (McLaughlin & Talbert, 2006; Sergiovanni, 2000; Servage, 2008), teachers can become each other's critical friends, not only generating knowledge but also assessing the knowledge claimed by others.

Teachers' CPD, however, cannot and should not be limited to episodic CPD seminars, where teachers' professional exchange is short-lived and hence unsustainable (Bantwini, 2009; Robinson, 2002). To promote teacher learning, it is important that teachers participate in communities of practice (Lave, 1992; Lave & Wenger, 1991), come together regularly to engage in professional exchange, to ask questions, to share the problems they face, and to exchange teaching ideas. If we want CPD to produce a greater and more lasting impact on teachers, the conventional mode of CPD needs to be supplemented by more innovative approaches, such as teachers' consortia, partnerships, collaboratives, study groups, and teacher development groups (Farrell, 2007b; Farrell, 2008; Head & Taylor, 1997), where teachers' learning communities can flourish. Even day-to-day meetings in schools can be turned into CPD opportunities, where teachers engage in communities of practice through sharing their experience and concerns, asking questions, and making suggestions – as in the CPD seminar described in the study. In EFL contexts, CPD is still dominated by traditional approaches which fail to maximize the teacher's role. As lack of time and traditional mindsets are often seen as obstacles to teacher collaboration, it is crucial that teachers and school administrators re-consider priorities in their work, find time for participatory forms of CPD, and experience for themselves the empowering effects of a participant-driven mode of CPD.

Conclusion

This paper presents the findings of a study that demonstrates how practicing teachers, in partnership with the teacher educator, can contribute to CPD programs through

their active involvement, and how a participatory mode of CPD can enrich teacher learning. In EFL contexts, teachers can be encouraged to play a more active role – e.g. to present ideas, to challenge assumptions of current practice, to pose questions, to share concerns, and to discuss solutions that are pertinent to their contexts. They need to be encouraged to “move out of their submissive position” (Borg, 2009, p.358) and freed up to undertake a more innovative role. In the study, teachers’ active involvement in CPD enabled them to think and reflect more seriously on their practice, and one teacher even did some in-depth research in preparation for the seminar. By the same token, if teachers are provided with more opportunities to take charge of their own CPD, teacher learning can be greatly enriched. The findings of the study are also pertinent for non-EFL teachers, who can be equally empowered to take on an active role in their own CPD. Future research can continue to identify conditions and elements that facilitate a participatory mode of CPD and explore collaborative efforts between teacher educators and practicing teachers in providing strong CPD programs to enrich teacher learning.

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Appendix 1: Questionnaire

Section A: Personal information (Q1-4)

Section B: The guest speakers' panel discussion

Please circle the response that best describes your level of agreement with each of the statements below.

| | Strongly agree | Agree | No opinion | Disagree | Strongly disagree |
|---|-----------------------|--------------|-------------------|-----------------|--------------------------|
| 5. The guest speakers understand the concerns of frontline teachers. | 5 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 |
| 6. They have provided some practical ideas about how to give feedback on student writing. | 5 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 |
| 7. The panel discussion has enriched my understanding of my role as a writing teacher. | 5 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 |
| 8. The panel discussion is stimulating. | 5 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 |
| 9. I have benefited a lot from the panel discussion. | 5 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 |

10. What do you like **most** about this seminar?

11. What do you like **least** about this seminar?