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In-service Teachers' Training: The Case of University Teachers in Yangon, Myanmar

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Abstract: Research studies show a number of significant contributions of professional development programs towards teachers' teaching skills. This paper explores the views of eight (8) university lecturers in a university in Yangon, Myanmar with regards to the teacher capacity building and language enhancement training program they attended from 2014-2016. The interview data, which were subjected to qualitative content analysis were taken from the participants' personal knowledge and experience of the teacher training program. The data were read many times, coded, and assigned to different themes. Findings revealed two themes; appreciation and hardships. Although teacher participants were glad to be part of the training program, they also coped with some challenges. Some important implications for the enhancement of the teacher training programs and language education in Myanmar were discussed and future research directions were also offered.

Introduction

The importance of teacher training and other professional development programs for teachers has been emphasized and discussed by a number of previous studies in the literature. For example, it provides teachers the opportunity to share their teaching practices (Ulla, 2017). It updates teachers with current teaching trends (Steadman, 2008) and other relevant teaching issues and solutions. It equips teachers the necessary teaching skills for their students' learning (Supriatna, 2015). And, it improves teachers' qualifications (Simon, 2013). However, given the positive contributions of teacher training programs towards teachers' teaching practices, there have been insufficient quality teacher training programs made in the ASEAN context because of the lack of qualified teacher trainers (Weil, 2013). Although this is the case in most of the nations in the region, the government and the Ministry of Education departments have tried to address this concern by setting up teacher training centers in their own countries. For instance, there are a number of teacher training institutions and universities in Vietnam that were established in order to provide training for the local teachers to improve their teaching skills and qualifications (Dudzik & Nguyen, 2015; Nguyen, 2015; Nguyen & Thuy, 2015). In Indonesia, the government has also mandated the creation of a faculty professional development program both for in-service and pre-service teachers to improve the quality of their teaching (Widiati & Hayati, 2015). Similarly, in Malaysia, professional development programs were also formed to better the English language instructions of the English teachers in the government schools (Hall, 2015). And, a practicum teaching for pre-service teachers and yearly teacher training programs for in-service

teachers were also required by both the Department of Education and the Commission on Higher Education in the Philippines to prepare and update the teaching skills of the teachers (Ulla, 2016; Ulla, Barrera, & Acompañado, 2017).

In Myanmar, its education was once regarded as the best in Southeast Asia (Harkki, 2017; Hays, 2014) due to its high literacy rate of its people and a quality standard of education (Oxford Burma Alliance, 2017). When the country was under the military government for 50 years, its education system had begun to decline. All higher education institutions were closed due to a number of students' protest. The Burmese language was used as the medium of instruction at lower education institutions, putting an end to the decade's use of the English language (Australian National University Press, 2017). Today, the country has been experiencing massive reforms in politics, economy, and education. Among these reforms in education are the English language capacity building and the teacher-training of teachers and teacher-educators with modern teaching methodologies across Myanmar. This English language capacity building and teacher-training program are witnessed in the different organizations from different countries that extended support for the education reform of the country. The Institute of International Education of the USA (Goodman, 2013), the English for Education College Trainers of the British Council (Ulla, 2017), and the Japan International Cooperation Agency have been assisting and supporting Myanmar government in the improvement of its education system. Thus, the present study attempts to identify the views, the challenges, and the benefits of the teacher training programs in Myanmar from the perspectives of the university lecturers in Yangon. As there are only a few teacher-related studies conducted in Myanmar, this study also bridges the gap in the literature. Finding out the views, the challenges, and the benefits of the teacher training in Myanmar from the university lecturers in Yangon and its implication to the language education is vital in the continued education reform of the country.

The Education Condition in Myanmar

Although education in Myanmar is highly valued, its system has been described as highly centralized (Weil, 2013). This is due to the fact that higher education in the country lacks autonomy to stand on its own since there are different ministries that oversee one certain university or college. This made its education system complicated. Hayden and Martin (2013) stated that as a result of over 50 years of military rule, education in Myanmar has been in a much-weakened state. This is evident in the poor academic building's physical and internal structure; the practice of traditional teaching methodologies, and the lack of teacher training programs and other professional development programs for teachers. Thus, this is the reason why the government is thrusting for the improvement of the education system of the country.

Generally, the Ministry of Education in Myanmar is the main provider of education. It employs innovative means to get the required number of qualified teachers. Hence, teacher training in basic education sub-sector is provided using two approaches; pre-service teacher training programs and in-service teacher training programs (Ministry of Education, 2004). Accordingly, there are other forms of teacher training courses that are being conducted in the country. Among these courses are the Education College-based Teacher Training Course (conducted for the uncertified teachers) and the Township-based Primary School Teacher Training program, which is a one-year course in collaboration with Township Education Officers conducted during weekends, and during school vacation in October and December (Ministry of Education, 2004). Despite all the teacher-training programs implemented by the Ministry of

Education all over the country, it seems that the training program that the teachers attended is not of high quality since the teachers who deliver the training themselves received no formal training to train other teachers (Ulla, 2017).

Thus, the reform in education in Myanmar places higher interest in teacher training. Sunday (2015) believed that the success of the education reforms lies in the teachers who are teaching in the classroom. Training the teachers will improve their knowledge of a subject matter and keep updated of the relevant teaching strategies needed for the students (Steadman, 2008). It is another important area for faculty development, wherein teachers become more qualified; and will be able to prepare their students for their future jobs (Simon, 2013). Without refreshing or updating their knowledge and skills, teachers may not be able to engage students in learning nor will they be able to provide students with appropriate skills for competitive living in modern society (Supriatna, 2015).

English Language in Myanmar

The reform of the education in Myanmar does not only concentrate on teachers' capacity building and teaching skills. It also focuses on the improvement of and building up the English language skills of all state teacher trainers in Myanmar. English in Myanmar is a foreign language and is not widely used as a medium of instruction in classrooms across the country (especially in the government schools, colleges, and universities). When the English for Education College Trainers project team of the British Council visited some schools in the country, they noted that English is supposed to be used as a medium of instruction in upper secondary schools for Maths and the Sciences but this does not tend to happen as only a few teachers and not all can use English (EfECT Handbook, 2014). Although the textbooks used are in English, teachers who teach these subjects translate them into their native language, which is the Myanmar language for the students to understand the concept, thus ending in memorizing the concepts rather than understanding them. Because of this situation, many teacher educators and students can hardly communicate in English.

Consequently, with teachers who have a low level of English proficiency, most likely they tend to resort to a conventional method of classroom teaching which is more passive and teacher-centered. Weil (2013) stated that teaching in most classrooms (in Myanmar) is dominated by "call and response" styles, with a very limited interaction between students and faculty. This is the reason why there is a need for a language capacity building among the teachers in the country. Improving the English language proficiency of all teachers in the country is significant towards the success of its education reform (McCord, 2013). Furthermore, teachers should be able to use the English language effectively in the classroom so that students would be able also to learn to use the language. This will also provide access for more students to attend high-quality English language courses at schools and universities within the country (Simon, 2013).

The EfECT Teacher Training Program of the British Council

One program aimed at improving the quality of education through its teachers in Myanmar has been the English for Education College Trainers (EfECT) project of the British Council Myanmar. The project was run by the British Council-Myanmar in partnership with the Volunteer Service Overseas (VSO) and co-funded by the UK Department for International Development

(DFID). It aimed to improve the quality of education by delivering language proficiency and methodology training of all state teacher educators from 24 Education colleges and universities across Myanmar. Two foreign teacher-trainers and in some cases three trainers were placed in each education colleges and universities (EfECT Handbook, 2014).

The project ran for two years, from August 2014 to August 2016. The first year of the project (August 2014-August 2015) was focused on improving the English language proficiency of all state teachers in the country by emphasizing speaking and listening skills along with basic grammar. The second year (September 2015-August 2016) concentrated fully on different child-centered teaching methodologies where classroom observations and teaching assessments were done. The teachers who participated in the EfECT program received language proficiency training for two hours every day except every Wednesday and Friday when they only had an hour of the program. In a week, they had to complete eight hours of training.

Studies on Teacher Training

Some studies in English language teaching and teacher education in the ASEAN region have investigated several aspects of teacher training programs. A number of these studies concentrated on the program effectiveness; its problems and solutions. Among these studies is the study conducted by Supriatna (2015). Supriatna revealed that a teacher training conducted in Indonesia was ineffective. The study had moved into recommending a training program designed for teachers at a provincial level. Jamil, Razak, Raju, and Mohamed (2015) also described the training program in Malaysia and found that there were only a few teachers who were qualified to teach in the country. In order to address this issue, the Malaysian government had offered a more attractive remuneration package to invite more qualified teachers. Similarly, Nguyen (2015) was able to suggest some possible solutions in order to improve the quality of teacher training of the different teacher training institutions in Vietnam. On the other hand, Lingam (2012) did a teachers' perceptions study regarding teacher training in Vanuatu Institute of Teacher Education and she found that teachers had positive perceptions of the teacher training they had. The same study was also made by Nenty, Moyo, and Phuti (2015). Their findings revealed that the teacher training programs were perceived to be effective by the teachers. Lastly, Kagoda, and Sentongo (2015) also reported that teacher trainees should be supported and guided by their academic heads in order to master the subject contents they would be teaching in class.

The literature cited above, although they dealt with teacher training programs in some parts of the ASEAN region, none of them had focused on Myanmar, its teachers, and its teacher training programs. Since Myanmar is in the state of reforming its education system after the military rule, it is the right and best time to study Myanmar teachers' perceptions with regards to the training programs in the country. By doing this, one can get a good understanding of the education system of the country and the role of the teachers in educating the children in the schools. It is thus, the purpose of this study to explore and discuss the views of Myanmar teachers on the use of the English language in and out of the classroom; their perceptions with regards to teacher training and its implications in the Myanmar context. This is to understand them as teachers who are builders of their country's future leaders and their country's system of education so that education policy-maker and the Ministry of Education can address the issues and challenges they faced in the training program conducted across the country. This study tries to address the following question;

1. What are the views of the teachers with regards to teacher training and English language capacity building in the country in relation to the following:
 - (a) using child-centered teaching strategies, and
 - (b) using English in classroom discussion?

Methodology

This is a phenomenological study (Lester, 1999) wherein the experiences of the participants were given the most emphasis. Thus, the data of the present study were taken from the individual interviews which focused on the participants' personal knowledge and experience of the teacher training program they have attended.

Setting and Participants

This study was conducted in one of the universities in Yangon, Myanmar where one of the teacher training programs was held from 2014 to 2016. The teacher training was attended by a number of university lecturers and some Master of Education students. The researcher chose the university as the research setting since he was one of the teacher-trainers in the teacher training program for 10 months. There were 37 primary school teachers and 14 university professors and lecturers who attended the said training. However, the researcher only considered those participants who were university professors and lecturers since they were teaching at the same time attending to training program. They were informed about the research and its objectives through a letter which emphasized their voluntary participation and the confidentiality of the data. Of the 14 university professors and lecturers, only 8 (all females) expressed interest to be part of the study. These lecturers aged 31-60 and had total years of teaching experience of 6 to 40 years. Six of these lecturers held a doctorate degree, while two were Master of Arts or Master of Science degree holders. Their English proficiency level was at Intermediate B1 of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages according to the result of their Aptis test conducted by the EfECT project team.

Data Gathering Procedure and Analysis

After the participants had given their consent to be part of the study, an individual interview was then conducted with 8 teachers through face to face and Facebook chats. The individual interview, which was done in English was recorded through the use of a mobile phone. The questions in the interview, which were posted on the research problem centered on the participants' experience and their views about the teacher training program they attended. Since the participants had different teaching timetables, they were interviewed at different places and a different time.

All the data taken from the interview were subjected to qualitative content analysis (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). The responses were read many times to understand and to get the theme from the data. They were coded and assigned to different categories where the themes were formulated.

Interview Findings

Teachers' Views on the Teacher Training Program

For the purpose of presentation, some excerpts from the individual interview are presented below.

Based on the individual interview conducted, appreciation on and hardships with regards to the teacher training program that the participants attended were the themes developed for the study.

Appreciation

With the teacher training program that the participants had attended, all of them had a positive view of it. They were thankful that they had the opportunity to practice using the English language with English speaking foreigners. They said that it was their first time to meet, learn and study English and other child-centered teaching strategies with a foreigner trainer. A Physics lecturer stated;

Our official language is not English, so we often do not use it. Even in our own classrooms, we do not deliver our lessons in English because we are not confident to use it, and we are more comfortable using our own language. In this program, we get the opportunity to use English, especially in speaking and listening. We also learn to become confident in using the language in any situations.

One lecturer also disclosed;

Because of this program, I've got to expose myself to foreigners who speak English. In pair group activities and group discussion, I can practice my speaking skills with my classmates and my teacher.

Other comments with regards to the conduct of the teacher training in the country were made by an English lecturer and a Methodology teacher. They said,

Through this training, we can also adopt new teaching strategies, games, activities, and methods of teaching from our teacher which we can use and apply in our own classrooms.

This is my first time to attend a training like this and I am glad to be one of the trainees because I knew that this kind of opportunity would make me a better teacher.

Although teacher-trainees felt that they have a poor ability in using the English language, they pointed out some positive effects of attending the teacher training to their English speaking confidence. Few of them said:

I did not dare to speak English before, but now I am confident to use English even though I mispronounce almost all the words. I felt very shy and afraid to deliver a presentation in English and I always did it in my native language.

Because of this training program, I become confident using the language.

I am more confident now compared before. I have now the confidence to use English language in classroom discussion. I am no longer afraid of talking to a foreigner.

I can now use the English language in my classroom discussion.

Hardships

One of the issues that was raised in the individual interviews with regards to the teacher training program in the country has been the difficulty of the teacher-trainees to adapt to the kind of teaching methodologies that their trainers used in their training sessions. One lecturer from the Theory department stated;

For me, it is my first time to experience what a student-centered teaching strategy is in the real classroom. I am an education teacher but I personally did not apply all these strategies in my class because I did not know how to use them. I am also worried that my students will not understand the lesson.

Another lecturer who found difficulty in the teaching style expressed;

I am already in my 50's and doing group work, games, and other activities in the classroom is already tiring for me. Besides, this kind of classroom teaching requires a lot of preparations.

One lecturer thought that she found it impossible to make her classroom interactive due to a big number of students in one class. This was also seconded by another lecturer from the Chemistry department who said that some of her students had a low English proficiency level. She was worried that her students might not be able to understand the activities.

Although it is fun, I wonder if I can do it in my class of 40 students. There are many of them in my class and it would be their first time to experience this kind of teaching methodologies. I am not sure how are they going to respond to this.

Most of my students cannot speak and understand English. I think talking to them and giving them the instruction in the English language is going to be hard.

A number of my students would not understand the discussion if it was done all in the English language. However, I tried to use English in my class so that my students would get used to it.

Another issue that was noted in the interview was the heavy teaching load of these teacher-trainees. One of them said;

There were some problems I faced during the course of the training program. One of these was my teaching duty. I had a heavy workload and I still had to supervise my students and attend meetings. Because of this, I missed some sessions of the program.

One lecturer had also mentioned one of the problems she faced in the teacher training program.

I am poor at listening and I sometimes do not understand the audio being played in class because some of the topics are not familiar to me.

The use of English in the Classroom

Most of the teacher-trainees who had B1 English proficiency level believed that their English language skills were poor, especially in oral communication. However, they still tried to use the language in their classroom instructions.

I always use both my native language and English to explain and to give illustrations and examples in my class. I found it difficult to do my discussion all in the English language since I am still practicing and getting used to speaking the English language

In my class, I have been using the English language most of the time since I joined the teacher training. Although I knew that I committed some grammatical and phonetic errors, I still tried to use it especially when talking to my students in the class.

I believed that using English as a medium of instruction in the classroom is the best way to practice using the language, especially that students were used to listening and using the local language. Through this, students will also get to be familiar with the language.

Discussion and Implications

This present study attempted to identify the views of the university teachers in Myanmar with regards to the teacher training conducted in the country. Like the findings of Lingam (2012); Nenty, Moyo, and Phuti (2015); and Kagoda and Sentongo (2015) which revealed the positive effects of the teacher training program to those teacher-trainees who attended it, the findings of the present study also suggested that teacher-trainees held positive views on the English for Education College Trainers (EfECT) teacher training program of the British Council Myanmar. A common response from the participants in the present study had been that their speaking confidence had improved. Most of them said that they were now more confident speaking to foreigners and using the English language as a medium of instruction in the classroom. To them, the teacher training they attended was their only training that made them practice speaking and communicating confidently in English. The improved confidence of the teachers after attending to any professional development program has also been reported in the studies of Brown (2014); Gatt and Karppinen (2014); and Jung, Cho, and Ambrosetti (2011). Gu and Papageorgiou (2016); Anderson, Bartholomew, and Moeed (2009) revealed that teachers' confidence is an important tool to carry out classroom discussion since it affects learning and teaching. Teachers who have less confidence may be spending more time on learning activities which do not cater to the language needs of the students (Ulla & Winitkun, 2017). If this happens, students' learning may be hindered and ineffective. Thus, teacher training is a significant factor towards improving teachers' confidence. It does not only update the teaching skills of the teachers, it also enhances the level of confidence of the teachers especially in using the English language both in and out of the classroom.

Notably, English is a foreign language in Myanmar (Ireland & Van Benthuyssen, 2014) and to the Myanmar university teacher-participants. They admitted that they were all weak and had low levels of English. As a result, they could speak English but not fluently in a conversational situation. They could understand English but was limited only to simple vocabulary. This was the reason why they always used Myanmar language, their native language both inside and outside of the classroom. Apparently, they were not exposed to native speakers and other speakers of the English language. Thus, they seemed to be unfamiliar with the sounds of English. However, with the teacher training program in the country, it gives the teachers the avenue to practice using the language both in and out of their classrooms. And it gives them the opportunity to be exposed to

English speaking foreigners. Joy (2013); Şahin (2005); and Tonoian (2014) asserted that exposure to and using the language will increase the chance of the learners to learn the language. Thus, this suggests that Myanmar teachers should be given more chances to be introduced to different situations where the use of English is deemed important. Training programs in the country should focus also on pronunciation lesson and intensive listening skill exercises so that familiarity with the English pronunciation might be achieved. Topics that are also relevant to Myanmar context should also be included in the teaching materials so that teacher-trainees will be able to relate to them.

This study also found some challenges that these teachers were facing with regards to the teacher training in the country. These include having a tight time-table, difficulty to adapt to different student-centered teaching strategies, and students having low English proficiency levels. Supriatna (2015) revealed that one of the issues that teachers faced in Malaysia is having a heavy workload and a tight timetable. Teachers who have more hours of teaching and lesson preparations are already tired and are no longer motivated to attend to different training programs. In the present study, although the teacher-trainees had a tight timetable, they still had attended and completed the training sessions. This only suggests the willingness, determination, and interest of the participants towards improving not only their teaching practices but also their language proficiency. However, adapting to student-centered teaching methodology also posed a challenge for these teachers. A number of them noted that having a student-centered classroom might be difficult for them as their students had a low proficiency level in English, they had a big class size, and they needed more time for their lesson preparation.

It should be noted that these teachers were not used to this kind of methodology as they were only familiar with the conventional way of classroom teaching. All of these teaching and learning strategies were new to them and using them in their own classrooms might be a challenge that they need to cope with. They need time to reconstruct their conventional way of teaching and turn their classroom into a more student-centered one. Thus, this is something that the Ministry of education and other education institutions in the country should consider in providing professional development for teachers. Having motivation and willingness to be trained, teachers across the country should be exposed to child/student-centered approach to teaching. Teacher-trainees should be trained to different interactive activities, games and other teaching and or learning styles and strategies that are student-centered in the classroom so that they will get used to this method of teaching and eventually use them in their own classroom.

While this study has reported both positive views of the teachers and the challenges they faced regarding the teacher training program they attended, it should be noted that the results were only limited to the teachers who were teaching in one of the universities in Yangon, Myanmar. Therefore, the data cannot be a representative of the entire teachers of Myanmar. More studies on the views and perceptions of teachers with regards to teacher training program in Myanmar with primary and secondary teachers as participants should be conducted. This is to compare the views of the teachers from the higher education department and the teachers from the lower education. Studying the effects and impact of teacher training to the professional growth of Myanmar teachers would also be a sound research to undertake.

Conclusion

Since Myanmar (Burma) after decades of isolation and military control has just begun to cope with and embrace the changes needed for its development and progress especially on its education, it is a high time to study and explore teachers' views on the current teachers training and language proficiency program in the country. By doing so, one would be able to understand the state and condition of English language teaching and learning in Myanmar.

Although the results of the present study revealed some issues and challenges in the training program (tight teaching workload, being weak and poor in listening skill due to teachers' unfamiliarity of the native speaker's accent and pronunciation, and difficulty to adapt to the communicative learning and teaching styles of teaching), teachers still held positive views about the teacher training program they attended. Teacher-trainees were glad to participate in the program as they got to expose themselves to English speaking teacher, practice their English skills, and enhance their confidence in using the English language in communication. They also learned some student-centered teaching methodologies from their foreign trainer which they could use in their own classrooms. Thus, teacher training plays an important role in the professional development of the teachers. Therefore, this should be prioritized and new classroom teaching trends should be provided for the teachers to advance the education system in Myanmar.

Admittedly, teacher training and other professional development programs are an important element for preparation and qualifications of teachers to teach in the classroom. Giving the teachers the right training programs they need is vital for the education reform in the country. Thus, training the teachers on different student-centered teaching strategies and improving their English language proficiency not only in Myanmar but to all the ASEAN nations would have a positive impact on the language education in the region.

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