



Teachers' Training Needs for Reading Instruction: Perspectives from Teachers at English Education Centers in China

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In China, there has been a sustained shift in the English education landscape towards instruction that emphasizes the productive use of English for children. To address this shift, afterschool English education centers have developed; they comprise an integral component of the Chinese education environment (Bolton & Botha, 2015; Bolton & Graddol, 2012; Freeman, 2020; Jiang, 2003). Because of this growth with English education centers, there has been a sustained need for English teachers to staff them.

To meet these staffing needs, this sector employs local and foreign teachers. Foreign teachers, though, are preferred over local teachers. There are many reasons for these preferences, such as the idea these teachers possess linguistic strengths as native speakers, cultural familiarity with English speaking contexts, and pedagogic knowledge of communicative language teaching (Rao & Yuan, 2016; Stanley, 2013). There are many issues, though, involved with hiring foreign teachers. There are concerns about cultural sensitivity and appropriateness of methodologies used in a Chinese context with Chinese students (Rao, 2010; Rao & Yuan, 2016). Many teachers, as well, lack the requisite knowledge and skills required for more specialized language instruction (Barnawi, 2016; Hobbs, 2013; Stanley, 2013). These issues with hiring foreign teachers are important considerations when determining the quality of instruction and the impact it has on students' learning.

Many of these English education centers differentiate themselves by focusing on specific areas of English development, such as in reading and writing. Teachers, accordingly, are required to have a specific set of pedagogic knowledge and skills. The divergent staffing needs of these centers have led to requirements for teachers to be able to teach macro language skills using various methodologies. Regrettably, not all teachers are hired with that requisite knowledge and skill set.

With this awareness, I started my doctoral studies in the hopes of better understanding this problem and developing a means of addressing it. This Cycle 0 study is the first of many cycles in an action research project that will address my problem of practice: *How can teachers learn the pedagogic knowledge and skills they need to enact the curriculum effectively and efficiently?* To help better understand how to address this problem of practice, this study was guided by three research questions:

1. What barriers or concerns do teachers have with respect to teaching reading in English?
2. What strategies or approaches would teachers like to learn to increase their students' learning?
3. How might a professional learning community with several other teachers be useful to teachers?

Problem of Practice

In my specific context, the language education organization I work for manages 10 centers that use reading to help students develop English and higher-order thinking skills. As a result of this focus for our curriculum, teachers need to be able to instruct students with appropriate pedagogic knowledge.

Teachers who begin with my organization go through a training process managed by a team composed of trainers with similar backgrounds. These trainers have had experience teaching our courses and have developed an understanding of the curriculum. Their knowledge is based on their experiences, and as a result, may lead to gaps in their understanding of the curriculum. They then may perpetuate those gaps with the teachers they are training. The inconsistency from teacher to teacher and from center to center has affected teachers in knowing what and how to teach the curriculum, which influences teaching and student learning.

This problem was brought to my attention in December 2018. At that time, the curriculum team presented curricular changes to one of our reading programs across the different centers. At the end of the presentations, many teachers asked questions concerning reading skills and strategies. Some sought out clarification, but others were confused and did not understand what was being discussed because the information was new to them. These initial concerns only grew throughout 2019. I learned of additional gaps in knowledge and expectations from additional training sessions, observations, focus groups, and teachers' feedback.

The question of how to provide the necessary training and information to teachers led to internal debates on how best to address this situation. Because each center is unique and in different cities, a persistent concern is on how to ensure teachers' training is durable and sustainable. This question of how to provide teachers with required information efficiently and appropriately persists and resulted in this study.

Methods

This initial qualitative Cycle 0 study is a reconnaissance in understanding the perspectives teachers have on their education and training needs. The methods section will describe the participants, instruments, procedures, and the means of data analysis used.

Participants

Four teachers participated in this study. To protect their identities, I have used pseudonyms (Cohen et al., 2018). Each teacher holds different positions and has been with our organization for different lengths of time. Yvonne holds a senior teaching position and has been working for the organization for less than a year. She has a graduate degree and has taught English as a foreign language (EFL) for two years. Mason holds a senior teaching position and has worked for the organization for more than a year. He has an undergraduate degree and has taught EFL for more than 5 years. Emily holds a junior teaching position and has worked with the organization for less than a year. This is her first teaching job abroad. She has an undergraduate degree and has received an EFL teaching certificate. Edison holds a senior teaching position and has been with the organization for less than a year. He has a graduate degree and has taught EFL for more than five years.

Instrument

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with the four teachers. The purpose of these interviews was to understand their perspectives on training (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015). Twelve questions were asked in total. The first three questions solicited background information on prior experiences related to training.

An example of one of these questions is, “What were your prior experiences in teaching reading?” They were then asked four questions related to the training they had received with our current organization concerning reading instruction and knowledge. One example of these questions is, “What are your feelings about your initial preparation and training in reading?” The following three questions solicited ideas on how training could be improved and what strategies or approaches they would like to learn and apply in their classrooms. For example, “How might the curriculum team help teachers?” Teachers were given opportunities to ask additional questions or to provide additional information at the end of the interview.

Procedure

All research materials were submitted to Arizona State University’s Institutional Review Board, which exempted this study from review. After receiving the exemption, I contacted a senior academic staff member at my organization—who served as a gatekeeper (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019)—who recommended six teachers. This senior staff member sent out introductory emails or instant messages to solicit these teachers’ willingness to participate. Four teachers responded they were interested, and I scheduled interview times with each of them. They were sent the recruitment consent letter for them to read. Prior to the start of each interview, the teachers were asked to provide verbal consent that they understood the letter’s contents, as well as if they had any questions before we started. All interviews were conducted online via XYLink, a Chinese teleconferencing platform. Each interview was recorded using the Otter voice meeting notes app on an iPhone Xs Max, which provided an audio recording and rough transcript of the interview. All data was downloaded from the iPhone onto a password-protected cloud server.

Data Analysis

For the analysis of the interview data, I used the basic premises of Strauss and Corbin’s (1998) constant comparative method from grounded theory. I listened to each interview to develop a sense of what the teachers were saying. I listened to the interviews again to develop codes for the ideas and concepts that emerged from what each teacher had said. I then looked through the partial transcripts to apply the codes. Once the codes were applied to the transcripts, I looked through the coded transcripts and listened to the interview recordings to identify categories in the data. Once categories emerged, I went through the partial transcripts and listened to the recordings to see if the categories were appropriate. Looking through partial transcripts and listening to the recordings once more, I began to identify themes.

I wrote and distributed the identified themes and findings to the four teachers to allow them the opportunity to check for accuracy (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). Each teacher was asked to assess whether I used their words appropriately, whether the identified themes are justified, as well as whether the interpretations I made based on their information properly represented their perspectives. Responses from the four teachers indicated they found my interpretations and use of their words appropriate.

Results

From the interviews, four themes emerged. These teachers expressed: (1) the importance of education preparation (formal and informal) for teaching, (2) the desire for interactive learning experiences for teaching training and development, (3) the need for continuous guidance in teacher learning and professional development, and (4) having relevant and situationally appropriate expectations.

Education Preparation

Each teacher, when asked to describe what training they had received regarding reading instruction, stated they had learned about reading instruction largely through self-education. As Edison explained, “But there was nothing, I wouldn't say you know that was, ur, like any courses or anything. So a lot of it was just kind of gained through trial and error.” When two of the teachers had participated in reading training, they stated it was meant as an introduction to reading. Emily described her experience as, “We got some information but not a lot because we mainly focused on the sort of verbal side of it and creating sort of activities for students.” As a result, these teachers started instructing reading with little prior experience or knowledge from their formal education.

Interactive Learning

How these four teachers learned about reading while on the job differed in terms of activities and procedures. Yet, all the activities they described had an interactive quality to them, which required them to engage with others to learn and co-create knowledge. A better understanding of what students experienced and how to effectively reach them through instruction was one thread two teachers mentioned. Emily had participated in a reading skills workshop where she was a student experiencing the process of learning how to use the reading skill of visualization. As this teacher explained:

[The trainer] was talking about all these different... techniques that we are using but we don't know that we use it because we do it automatically, because we are English speakers, but to try and explain it to someone who doesn't speak English. Obviously, we need to use these skills...

Learning about reading instruction by going through a reading lesson themselves provided insights on what students go through and how teachers could adapt their instruction.

Taking part in the scenario allows teachers to learn from the simulated experience of what they likely will encounter in the classroom and plan accordingly. As Mason stated, “Having someone lay out a story ahead of me, gives me some context, so I can sort of see the path ahead and I think... We have an idea of what choices are coming my way and what I can do.” Being able to experience how to instruct reading affects how teachers begin the process of developing how they will instruct students.

Guidance

In association with interactive learning, the four teachers expressed the importance of explicit guidance for teachers' development. Edison implicated, “And I was thinking, if nobody's really observed them and they're just doing things and it's not because the teachers are bad, it's not because the teachers are lazy, it just because they don't know any different.” When teachers have someone with the knowledge and experience to guide them, teachers feel they know what is expected of them and how they might develop effective reading lessons. Yvonne pointed out that with understanding the curriculum, “... a little bit more about how the... um... why the curriculum is structured the way it is. I feel like that would have been more useful just to know, of knowing where I was going with some of the courses.”

The process of how to understand that knowledge differs between the teachers. Yvonne was quite happy to have the information presented in an “information dump.” Other teachers, though, preferred some form of guidance and interaction to learning that information. Mason described it as being able to get into “...the mindset [to understand the] information that will be given to me in that medium.” Being guided to understand how to use that knowledge would be enhanced by establishing expectations for teachers as well.

Expectations

Expectations are tied to the other three themes, but all four teachers specially mentioned the need for clear expectations. As Mason explained:

...maybe some more explanation as to why this works, for young learners or maybe some, even some, like technical things, talking about the, the, the educators and philosophers and writers who talked about, um, the ideas that go into why a syllabus looks this way or why this is the first step in teaching phonics or this is the first step in teaching reading, so then teachers have not just the goal, but more mechanical thing to aim for, also the idea behind it, so they know what they're trying to do.

Having these clear expectations would allow teachers to know what they are expected to do. Emily expressed that having a lesson plan allowed for "a standard base that you teach from but it's also got room for your own development in it and your own sort of personal experience to go along with it which I really like." Knowing what they are supposed to do is something these teachers valued for their professional development and effective teaching in their classes.

Discussion

The four teachers in this study provided insights into what their needs are and how they would prefer to meet those needs. From the analysis of the data, the teachers emphasized the importance of education preparation, interactive learning, guidance, and clear expectations.

Each of the teachers indicated they needed to have the pedagogic knowledge and skills to be effective instructors in the classroom. Their prior educational background concerning reading did not provide the necessary information for the level of reading instruction they are expected to do in their current positions. These four teachers have qualifications based on the Chinese government's requirements for teaching in English education centers, which is at a minimum a certificate for EFL teaching. By the nature of certification courses, there is a limited amount of time able for course instructors to cover all aspects of teaching English in a foreign language (Barnawi, 2016; Hobbs, 2013). Each of the four teachers commented on the minimal to lack of instruction in reading that occurred in their EFL training. They learned on the job through trial and error.

As they learned about reading instruction on the job, the training they received affected how well they understood what they were learning. The four teachers mentioned that learning through interactive means helped them understand the information presented and for them to know how to use that information in the classroom. The teachers indicated interactivity could come through a variety of means from the use of scenarios with other teachers to general discussions. The use of scenarios with follow-up discussions related to education instruction has been used in several education domains to positive effect (Crow & Nelson, 2016; Imhof et al., 2016). Teachers who participate in scenario-based training develop a deeper understanding of how to instruct as they collaboratively construct their knowledge through analysis and reflection (Johnson, 2015). Three of the four teachers mentioned this mode of instruction as beneficial to their learning on how to instruct reading.

The teachers in the interviews indicated guidance was a specific form of interaction they found beneficial to their development or in developing others. Having experienced teachers support novice teachers was one way the interviewed teachers claimed guidance was useful. These experienced teachers provided information and skills that helped guide novice teachers as they started instructing students. But equally important was the need for this guidance to be sustained and supported throughout a career regardless of position. Whether a junior or senior teacher, guidance was needed to know one's strengths and areas of growth. Teachers benefit from such guidance at different stages of their careers from teacher education training (Nguyen & Yang, 2018; Valencia et al., 2009), to the initial induction into an

organization (Ahn, 2014; Yang & Bernat, 2011), and with continued professional development (Li, 2016; Yan & Yang, 2019). Guidance, thus, is seen as helping establish a path towards continued growth and development.

What that growth and development is, though, requires clear expectations. Expectations on what they were meant to teach, how to teach it, and how to evaluate their instruction were concerns the teachers had. When expectations are unclear or the path forward unknown, teachers are at times left frustrated in how they are to manage their duties imposed by others and themselves (Jonassen & Rohrer-Murphy, 1999). Such a situation can be frustrating and stifling when teachers lack a clear understanding of why something is to happen and how it is to happen (Valencia et al., 2006, 2009). Providing that information allows teachers to plan accordingly on what to include in lessons and how to instruct students.

Establishing these expectations can be guided by the people in the work community. Which, through interactive engagement with others, is established when those expectations are clearly articulated. And when these three concepts are present, teachers can fill in the gaps from their initial education about reading instruction.

Recommended Actions

To move forward with these findings, processes that allow teachers to interact with each other that provides guidance and clear expectations are suggested for further exploration. The considerations of the organization, the duties of teachers, and the context must be accounted for in terms of what the next steps are. One possibility may be the use of innovation configurations, developed by experienced stakeholders, to provide teachers the guidance of what is expected of them (Hall & Hord, 2006; Roy & Hord, 2004). Related would be how teachers develop their understanding of using these innovation configurations. Possibilities include establishing professional learning communities to discuss how to use the innovation configurations (Edwards & D'arcy, 2004; Yan & Yang, 2019), or working with others to build understanding through role-plays (Crow & Nelson, 2016; Johnson, 2015). Meeting these needs would address the concerns the four teachers had.

Limitations

The four teachers interviewed provided perspective on our shared work environment, but there are limits to what can be extrapolated. Each of these teachers works at different locations, which have their own unique work cultures within our organization. Issues such as how training is managed and how teachers interact with each other influences these teachers and their perspectives. These teachers were recommended by a gatekeeper at the organization and may present perspectives not shared by others. Finally, given the limited nature of this Cycle 0 study (Buss, 2018), it was not possible to interview teachers at every center in every city, thus some locations were not represented and may mask other perspectives germane to these issues. What has been provided with these interviews are unique insights that guide possible ways for additional investigations. These discernments, though, must still be questioned and reflected upon as new information and understanding is learned.

Conclusion

In relation to the research questions for this action research study, the four participants provided insights on how to address them. The need for interaction, guidance, and clear expectations to help provide information related to reading that was not covered in their initial teacher education courses or training will be further explored. Having this awareness helps establish parameters in the development of interventions. The information learned from this Cycle 0 study is the generation of awareness of what

teachers need based on their understanding and not one imposed by me as the researcher. Providing these four teachers an outlet to voice their views has empowered them to affect change.

More broadly though, these findings align with what is known about English education centers and the issues related to them. Students enroll in these centers to develop their abilities to use English. For that to happen they need teachers who are qualified and capable. Understanding how teachers should receive that knowledge and training are of the utmost importance for these teachers who develop professionally and for the students who they instruct. For too long academic research in EFL teaching has focused on traditional schooling—public schools, international schools, universities—with little known about English education centers. These centers are prevalent in China and the rest of the world. They have existed for decades, but the research database for this segment of the English education landscape is quite sparse. This study is one small part of what is hopefully a growing literature into this education segment.

The findings of this action research study are quite limited and focused on one organization and the needs of that organization. Yet the experiences of these four teachers are reminiscent of many other teachers who work at English education centers. It is hoped that the findings from understanding how to address these teachers' needs may prove useful and transferable to other similar contexts. The purpose of action research is to improve local practice and to find commonalities across practices so we may learn from each other and improve. And with that improvement, we become better educators and institutions for our students.

The Author

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