# Report on Training Courses Provided to ChineseTeachers

By A. Ian Slater

Recently, Assumption University played host to two visiting groups of Chinese teachers from the city of Kunming in Yunan province. The two groups (one of secondary school teachers and one of university instructors) visited AU to receive some teacher training and to be exposed to the curriculum and methods used at AU, particularly within the English Department. I was fortunate enough to be involved in the design and implementation of the training provided to both groups and would like to document what went on during the training and to offer my reflections on it.

The training was provided under the auspices of the Faculty of Arts Professional and Organisational Development Center (The ARTS-POD Center). This center was established in 2006 and is directly answerable to the Dean of the Faculty of Arts. It provides services to all departments of the Faculty of Arts as well as to other units within the university and to clients from outside the University as required. It has 2 foci: professional development, and organisational development.

- Professional development means, training faculty to teach better, to manage their time better, to write more and more effectively, to improve their knowledge in their own field and beyond, and to better prepare for and achieve academic titles. It also means raising the standards of testing and evaluation services provided by the faculty. A particular focus is on raising the English language competency of the faculty and other ARTS-POD clients.
- Organisational development means improving the environment within which the faculty work by reviewing, updating, and improving their professional skills and expertise, and enhancing their knowledge and experience. It also means improving the quality and standard of all written English (i.e. documents, exams, course outlines, handouts, notices) produced by the Faculty of Arts or ARTS-POD clients.

The Center is also responsible for the development and provision of external training, which is how it came to be responsible for the visiting Chinese teachers.

Group I: Secondary School Teachers

The first of the training programs provided was for 18 Chinese Secondary school teachers, all of whom taught at No. 14 Middle School, Kunming. The course was 45 hours in length and ran from July 12 to July 23. Entitled *Teaching English: an Inservice Training Course*, the objectives of the course were:

- To provide working practitioners in the field of ELT (English Language Teaching) with exposure to teaching techniques that have proven successful for experienced trainers from AU.
- To help ELT practitioners to gain practical skills which they could employ in their own teaching contexts.
- To provide the opportunity for ELT practitioners to discuss issues in ELT with other practitioners and experienced trainers.

• To allow ELT practitioners to develop a network of professional contacts both in Thailand and internationally.

The objectives, and indeed the content, of the course stemmed from my belief that most people involved in ELT are aware of the existence of two separate worlds. One is the world of mostly native-speaker teachers, who work in small, flexible classes with adequate resources and who are mainly responsible for developing new ideas in methodology. The other is the world of most other teachers, who work in large classes using a set syllabus, and who attempt to apply new methodology to their own teaching. There are differences in these two worlds, not only in resources and physical conditions, but also in underlying assumptions (e.g. about language, about learning, about the teacher's role) and in degree of freedom (e.g. freedom to experiment, to create material, to approach class relationships in a new way).

The course was thus an attempt to bridge the gap between these two worlds by presenting methodology in a form directly accessible to the trainees. The approach adopted was based on the following underlying principles:

- The material in the course ought to be *appropriate*; it should be limited to practical ideas and techniques that the teachers being trained can apply to their own teaching.
- New ideas and techniques should be presented *explicitly*. Even basic concepts in teaching and learning, such as 'presenting a structure', 'reading a text', or 'learning a rule' may be understood quite differently by different teachers, and simply describing techniques and procedures can lead to fundamental misunderstanding. Wherever possible, therefore, new techniques should be demonstrated and the trainees given a chance to experience them directly.
- The trainees are not native English speakers, as indeed the majority English language teachers are not. An important element in the course should therefore be *language improvement*. This must not be treated separately, but integrated into the course activities: trainees should be given practice in asking questions, writing examples, identifying structures, etc. and general oral fluency should be developed through discussion and practice activities.
- The adoption of new teaching methods depends on teachers developing new insights and attitudes, so the course should be concerned not only with practical training but also with *teacher education*. The teacher education should be mainly carried out implicitly through the course activities; for example, trainees would be asked to evaluate teaching techniques or choose between alternative teaching strategies.
- Most teachers are not necessarily convinced by or interested in applied linguistic theory, but they usually do have well-developed insights into teaching and learning. So, although new ideas presented in the course are often derived from applied linguistic theory and research,

they should be explained and justified in terms of the trainers' experience in real teaching situations.

All of the principles above relate to my belief in the importance of context in language teaching. Theory is all very well, but it must be considered in the light of the context in which a teacher works just as it must be adapted (through reflective practice) in order to be successfully applied in a particular context.

The course itself had a modular structure, so each unit was completely self-contained. Each training session was three hours long and involved three main kinds of activity: demonstrations, discussions, and pair and group activities.

*Demonstrations*

When a new technique was introduced, it was usually demonstrated, so that trainees could see how it worked. The demonstration was sometimes at the trainees own language level, so that they could experience the technique from the learners' point of view; sometimes it was at the language level of their students, so that they could see what would happen in their own classes.

Discussion

The new ideas in each training session were usually presented not through lectures but in the form of discussions in which the trainees participated and contributed their own ideas. This had the advantage of involving the trainees more and allowing them to bring their own experience to bear on the topic under discussion. It also helped the trainers to become aware of the teaching context in which the trainees worked and to modify the training provided accordingly.

Pair and group activities

Many of the activities in the course were designed to be done by the trainees working together in pairs or small groups. This allowed more trainees to be involved in the activity, and gave a chance for trainees to help each other and develop ideas together. It also provided reinforcement for the language improvement objectives of the training program, since the discussions were entirely in English.

The topics of the individual training sessions are shown below. In every case, trainers selected an area in which they felt they had expertise and which would be of interest and practical use to the trainees.

| **Lecturer** | **Topics/Activities** |
|---|---|
| A. Ian Slater | Introduction; Presenting structures |
| Asst. Prof. San Shwe Baw | Teaching basic reading |
| A. Bradford Abbot | Planning a week's teaching |
| A. Pakorn Atikarn | Eliciting |
| A. Julien Hardy | Presenting vocabulary |
| A. Alexender Nanni | Listening activities |
| A. Arlan Parreno | Writing activities |

| | |
|---|---|
| Dr. Soe Than | Using worksheets |
| A. Kamolthip Hongviboonvatya | School visit (St. Gabriel's) |
| A. Daniel Merillat | Communicative activities |
| A. Ian Slater | *Teaching pronunciation* |
| Dr. Soe Than | Classroom tests |
| A. Pakorn Atikarn | Reading activities |

At the conclusion of the training program, participants were asked to evaluate all aspects of the program, including the trainers, materials, topics, facilities, and the relevance and usefulness of the off-campus activities. In all cases, the responses were extremely positive. Evaluations were based on a series of 4-point Likert scale questions (with 1 being the worst and 4 being the best). For each question, the average rating exceeded 3.5. Trainees were also asked to supplement their responses with open-ended comments. These were again uniformly positive, with individual trainers (A. Pakorn, for example) being specifically mentioned in terms of providing relevant materials and teaching.

**Group II: University Instructors**

The University group came from Yunan Normal University and consisted of 8 instructors. They were given a 45-hour training program entitled *Comparative Curriculum and Instruction: Case Studies*. The objectives of the program were:

- To provide participants with an overview of the principles which underlie the EFL (English as a foreign language) curriculum development process within the English Department at Assumption University (AU).
- To demonstrate to participants how the interaction of theory and context informs decisions made regarding instructional processes within the English Department at AU.
- To provide participants with the opportunity to observe classes taught to students with a variety of English proficiency levels.
- To allow participants to provide meaningful feedback on observed classes to experienced trainers and to explicitly contrast practice within the English Department at AU with practice in their own contexts.

The rationale for the course was my belief that English language teachers in different contexts not only teach following different curricula in order to reach different goals, but also teach following different principles guiding their methods of instruction. The principles which underlie decisions about curriculum and instruction may or may not be made explicitly clear to classroom teachers. By looking explicitly at the design, implementation, and actual classroom teaching of a curriculum in one specific context, teachers should be able to make comparisons, draw parallels, and critically appraise similar decisions and methods in their own context. The use of case studies in this process of analysis grounds the observation and critical appraisal in real situations.

In the course itself, participants took part in 18 hours of workshops which provided them with an overview of the curriculum used within the English Department at AU,

along with the chance to explore its methodological underpinnings. They also had the opportunity to compare and contrast theories and methods with their own context.

Participants also had the opportunity to observe around 12 hours of classes taught at a variety of levels by teachers from the English Department. Opportunity to discuss, analyse, and respond to the classes was provided during the follow-up workshops.

Participants also had the opportunity to visit sites of historical and cultural interest around Bangkok and participate in some Thai cultural activities. These visits and activities made up to remainder of the course time. They were designed, organised, and conducted by A. Kamolthip.

The workshops themselves were conducted by the instructors responsible for the design, implementation, and supervision of the English courses on offer within the English Department. The lecturers and topics are shown below.

| **Lecturer** | **Topics/Activities** |
|---|---|
| A. Ian Slater | Overview of the English curriculum, Class observation skills |
| A. Ian Slater | Teaching Integrated skills, Basic English |
| A. Arlan Parreno | Workshop on integrated skills |
| Dr. Soe Than | English I; Discussion (pre-class observation) |
| Dr. Soe Than | English II; Group discussion |
| A. Robert Miles | English III; Group discussion |
| A. Robert Miles | English IV; Group discussion |
| A. Arlan Parreno | ESP ; Group discussion |
| A. Ian Slater | Review of class observations |

At the conclusion of the training program, the participants were asked to provide feedback on all aspects of the course using the same response methods as the group of secondary school teachers. Again, the responses were highly positive, with A. Arlan coming in for specific praise for his workshop on integrated skills.

Reflections

Being involved in creating and teaching both programs and having the opportunity to intercut with both groups of teachers was an interesting and rewarding activity on my part. One of the things that stood out with both groups, and was remarked upon by many of the trainers, was the high degree of motivation and genuine interest shown by the trainees. I have had the opportunity to conduct teacher training in various parts of Thailand but certainly found these groups of trainees to be the most thoughtful, prepared, and engaged groups I have ever worked with. The university group was perhaps the more interesting to work with since it allowed me to make comparisons between their context and our own here at AU. Some parallels were immediately obvious. Their university is only around 6 years old but already has around 9,000 students. It is a private institution and the instructors characterised their students as being academically somewhat weaker than those students attending prestigious government universities. They also suggested that their students generally came from more wealthy families and had low levels of intrinsic motivation. Anyone who has taught at AU for any length of time should be nodding their head in recognition at this point.

The discussions I had with the teachers following their class observations were also instructive. While the Chinese instructors had classified their students as unmotivated, in many cases they felt the AU students they observed to be even less so. Similarly, they felt the level of English proficiency of the students to be quite weak and discipline (principally lateness and non-participation in class activities) to be more of a problem than in their own contexts.

I do not think these comments are inaccurate but nor do I see them particularly as criticisms. Every teacher faces the challenges of his or her particular context and identifying these contextual factors clearly can only help teachers to formulate more effective plans and methods to achieve their objectives. For the Chinese teachers, the opportunity to observe AU teachers in action helped them to make comparisons with their own context. I might add that all the Chinese teachers took the observation process very seriously. The trainees used a relatively unstructured class observation form which, nevertheless, highlighted the key elements of a successful language learning and teaching environment. (This is the same form used for class observations with the English Department, a copy of which may be found in the Basic English Teacher's Book). In virtually every case, the trainees made thoughtful, reflective, and detailed observations, in some cases running to over five pages of notes on an individual class. The follow-up discussions were similarly thoughtful and highly stimulating in which to be involved for me as a trainer.

In short, I found the whole exercise as interesting and insightful for me as I hope the two groups of trainees did. I am confident that they took away with them much useful, practical information which they can, with due reflection and adaptation, incorporate into their own teaching. One of the other positive outcomes was the forging of a strong link between the university group and the English Department. This was enhanced by a brief visit from their Dean, who was greatly impressed by the academic system in the English Department and by AU in general. He and I continue to be in touch, and are discussing the possibility of establishing a teacher exchange program. Interested teachers would do well to follow up this matter with me in the future.

Let me conclude by thanking all the AU trainers involved in making these two courses a success. Also, let me thank those instructors who graciously allowed their classes to be observed, showing trainees the "reality" of teaching in our context. The support staff involved, from the Faculty of Arts secretaries, to the technicians, and the Registration office staff, also deserve credit for helping to ensure that everything went smoothly. Lastly, the hard work by the Dean of the Faculty of Arts in helping to arrange the visits, to smooth out logistical wrinkles, and to offer a steady stream of advice (on a range of topics) is greatly appreciated.

It is my hope that this kind of training will become a more regular part of life here at AU and I invite instructors interested in becoming involved in future programs to contact me.

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