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Optimal Teacher Learning – What are the Vital Elements? Case Study of an Intensive INSET Program for English Teachers

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The paper aims to highlight the significant phases of *The Intensive INSET* provided for English language teachers in state schools in Sapporo, which was first implemented in 2004. It intends to examine the validity and effectiveness of the program by using qualitative data (semi-structured interviews) and aims to answer research questions as follows:

- What elements are essential in designing this INSET program effectively?
- To what extent are both theory and practice beneficial for INSET participants?

Findings show that the *Intensive INSET* seems to be regarded as an innovative and practical program by teachers. At the same time, there is still room for reconsidering the whole program in detail in the light of a more contextually appropriate selection of content. In particular, approaches to lecture-based programs may be in need of modification.

文部科学省からの「英語が使える日本人構想 (Action Plan 2003)」では英語教員の指導力向上が論じられ、それに準じて札幌市も公立英語教員全員を対象とした集中研修を企画した。この論文は、研修の企画者と参加者にそれぞれインタビューを行い、集中研修の内容と効果を理論と実践のバランスという視点から評価しようというケーススタディのまとめである。

Introduction

For decades a number of researchers have repeatedly advocated the significance of communicative language teaching in Japan, and the urgent need to develop teachers' communicative competence has arisen. As a response to public opinion, MEXT (Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports and Technology) embarked on a noteworthy innovation that targeted the improvement of English language education. This reform was entitled "The 2003 Action Plan," which includes both recommendations and instructions to be implemented by the educational establishment to overcome any perceived failings and to generally enhance language education as a whole. Regarding this plan, MEXT directed each prefecture / local education authority to carry out an in-service education and training program (INSET) within its five-year plan. Sapporo City launched its "*The Intensive INSET*" in May 2004, which is expected to stimulate teacher development since the characteristics of the course seemed quite innovative. Past INSET events had attached importance to "theory," or involved ideal model class demonstrations, and they have been often regarded as unpractical and dictatorial. For this reason, the *Intensive INSET*, based on reflection on past failures, is seen as a challenge to demolish such stereotypes among teachers and bring about effectiveness in classroom teaching.

This paper intends to explore several features of the one specific INSET event currently operating in Sapporo, and analyze its validity and effectiveness regarding the content of its program. It also aims to make possible recommendations for further improvement in the INSET program.

The 2003 Action Plan

In March 2003, MEXT officially announced an action plan entitled "Regarding the Establishment of an Action Plan to Cultivate 'Japanese with English Abilities (The 2003

Action Plan)’. ” The main objective of the plan is to have Japanese acquire English language abilities. The headings of the objective of the Plan are as follows:

Objectives

1. Improvement of English classes
2. Improvement of the teaching ability of English teachers and upgrading of the teaching system
3. Improvement of students motivation to learn English
4. Improvement in the evaluation system for selecting school and university applicants
5. Support for English conversation activities in elementary schools

(MEXT, 2003)

In order to achieve the objectives, the Plan indicates specific sources of funding and details of implementation, including detailed numbers of teachers and schools, dates and places. With reference to heading 2, “Improvement of teachers and teaching”: some specifications are drawn up as follows:

- *The Promotion of intensive training will be undertaken in a five-year plan. All English teachers can undertake training in the five years from 2003 through 2007.*

(MEXT, 2003, italic added)

This means MEXT provides access to intensive training for all English teachers to improve their teaching abilities, which applies to all of the 60,000 teachers in state schools all over Japan.

Inset in Sapporo

Sapporo is granted special rights by government ordinance for its large population; therefore the City Board of Education (BoE) has autonomy in in-service teacher education. Based on the pilot year in 2003, Sapporo BoE carried out the first intensive course in 2004, which covered one fourth of all the English teachers – 57 teachers – in

the city. The rest of the teachers were / will be assigned to courses either in 2005, 2006 or 2007. The objective of the Intensive INSET is summarized as follows:

Objectives of *The Intensive INSET*:

Improve the English skill and the teaching ability of the English teachers and upgrade the teaching system so that it attaches great importance to the development of students' communicative ability.

(Sapporo BoE, 2004)

As for the content of the program, the *Intensive INSET* course features both theory and practice (Refer to Appendices 1 and 2 for details). The obvious practical part – the 30-hour summer course – is unprecedented in terms of its intensiveness and practical content.

Effective INSET

Learning to teach always has a theoretical side and a practical side, and one of the most important aspects of professional training is that “knowledge needs to be integrated with practice” (Malderez and Bodoczky, 1999, p. ##). Most INSET tends to begin with theoretically structured arguments in favor of the innovation, before gradually progressing to more hands-on activities which encourage teachers to put what they have learned into practice. In this regard, the scheduling of the content of the *Intensive INSET* seems to follow the standard as such (See Appendices 1 and 2). Sadly, regarding the past INSET events, where I was also a participant, a typical complaint was that “these programs do not link theory and practice; I don't know how to make use of what the lecturer told us.” This reflects the stereotype of teachers as bystanders to the research community. In fact, knowledge on its own does not make teachers good at teaching. With this in mind, Richards and Lockhart, in their book “*Reflective Teaching in Second Language Classrooms* (1994)”, suggests not following the flawed transmission model, i.e., the top-down approach typified by a theoretical lecture; instead it recommends the reflective approach, i.e., Action Research, for teacher learning as a whole.

On the other hand, Freeman and Johnson (1998) claim that there are things that can be transmitted, and they are not necessarily trivial. In fact, theory can usefully help teachers grasp the process of reviewing actual classroom experience, and facilitate consequent planning for future action (Malderez and Bodoczky, 1999). Therefore, it can be said that success of transmitting knowledge depends on the context of operation, and the context of INSET needs to be a socially negotiated one, which reflects the background of teachers while addressing theory.

The Study

This paper focuses on two questions as follows:

- What elements are essential in designing this INSET program effectively?
- To what extent are both theory and practice beneficial for these INSET participants?

A small-scale qualitative study (the semi-structured interview) was adopted to identify the characteristics of the *Intensive INSET* in Sapporo. Four participants cooperated: 1) A head organizer/coordinator of the *Intensive INSET*, in the Teacher Training Section, Sapporo Education Centre in Sapporo BoE., 2) Three schoolteachers who are undergoing the *Intensive INSET*. The semi-structured questions to the organizer and the teachers regarding the *Intensive INSET* had a wide range of variety (See Appendices 3 and 4 for the detailed framework of the questions). However, because of the limited space, questions are as follows for discussion in this paper; the questions for the organizer are:

- 1) What are the content and its rationale in the INSET in terms of design?
- 2) What are the considerations regarding the balance between theory and practice?

(See Appendix 3 for details)

The questions for the four teachers are:

- 1) What are your impression regarding the balance between theory and practice and what are their relevance to classroom teaching?
- 2) What is the content of specific activities and lectures and what is your impression of them?

(See Appendix 4 for details)

All interviewees consented to be recorded and transcribed for the analysis. Documents both on the *Intensive INSET*, in the form of brochures for INSET participants, were collected from the Sapporo Education Centre as well.

Findings

Based on the collected data, several distinctive features of the *Intensive INSET* emerged. This paper focuses on two points; 1) the INSET Design, and 2) its theory and practice.

INSET Design

The program starts in May with orientation that explains the purposes of INSET to teachers, followed by a TOEIC-like English proficiency test. It has five theoretical lectures on methodology; communicative reading, evaluation, motivation and language acquisition, which are interspersed throughout the year. A five-day training course is provided intensively during students' summer vacation time (see Appendices 1 and 2). This interactive 30-hour course includes task-based, activity-based and project-based language lessons. The program concludes with the same TOEIC-like proficiency test. There have been no such INSET events in Sapporo in the past, and it appears that participants' interest and expectation were relatively high from the beginning. One teacher commented on the summer intensive course:

As for the language skill training part (i.e., summer intensive course), it met the needs of classroom. The training involves a lot of speaking activities...and they provided many materials and ideas that I feel like using in my class...

(Teacher C)

This also parallels the comment of the organizer, “teachers are more eager to learn than I expected.” The practical part, i.e., the summer intensive course, seemed to be welcomed by all three teachers interviewed. It also raised their motivation. *Presenting practical skills* and *involving teachers in practical activities* are characteristics of effective INSET (Hayes, 1997).

However, taking all the components together, there is one significant drawback of the *Intensive INSET*, that is, it lacks the opportunity for participants to reflect upon their own classroom teaching. To be specific, all lectures held in the *Intensive INSET* basically followed a top-down approach. The summer intensive course also seems to be strongly top-down oriented – for instance, the teachers from Berlitz demonstrate useful teaching activity so that teachers can imitate them. Although teachers seemed to enjoy the activities, they at the same time were critical of the content of the course as they felt a gap between the content and classroom reality. For instance, teacher A revealed a concern about the level of activities: “(the program is) for the teachers working in schools that rank in the higher 50% of students’ academic achievement (Teacher A)”.

This discrepancy between the content and the reality implies that the program still may need to shift to fit to the participant’s own individual setting as close as possible. In order to remedy this discrepancy and bring about optimal teacher learning to the participants, reflection on what improvements are needed in *individual* classrooms is essential in the program.

2) Theory and Practice

The study found that the balance between these two factors was deliberately sought in the design of the program. The organizer commented as follows:

I decided to subdivide this 10-day program into two parts. One is to improve the

English proficiency of teachers (five days summer intensive course). However, as you know, “being fluent in English” doesn’t necessarily equal “being good at *teaching* English”. So, the other part is a slightly more theoretical one, that is, methodology (five days of lectures).

(The organizer)

The collected data shows that four lectures on methodology were given by “experts” from local universities, except one lecture on “Methods of Evaluation” was given by a state schoolteacher. The inclusion of five lectures in the *Intensive INSET* is the outcome of feedback from the Pilot INSET, so it is expected to meet participants’ needs. However, Hayes (1997) claims these experts are likely to be evaluated negatively among teachers if the theories they offer seem remote from reality – in other words, if theory in general is detached from present practice it will be unacceptable to teachers. In fact, the organizer is aware of this problem and has tried to remedy the disadvantages of lecture style sessions. He commented:

I asked lecturers, “If you only provide theory, teachers will get bored. Please involve some practical demonstration as well.” By including activities, we try not to make teachers fall asleep. What we aim at is, ‘learning theory with fun...’

(The organizer)

The program in the brochure also indicates that lectures are intended to include some element of “workshop”, e.g., discussions or question sessions. However, this attempt does not seem to have been fully successful. One teacher said:

First, we had this lecture...everyone looked tired, because it was lecture style...actually, there was a question-answer session, but no one was asking questions. It was really one-way.

(Teacher C)

Another teacher said:

He (the lecturer) used difficult technical terms to explain some situation that I have been concerned about...but then, my question was “Yes, I’m already aware of the problem you are talking about...so, now what?” He did not explain how to make use of this knowledge in practice.

(Teacher B)

These descriptions support the claim of Freeman and Johnson (1998) that providing more research knowledge to teachers does not necessarily make them better practitioners. Teacher C also noted the difficulty of applying theory in the classroom:

If you want to make good use of the theory with your students, you need to simplify and interpret the lecture in your own words...in your own context...I wish the *lecturer* could adapt the content more to schoolteachers' level, not vice versa. The thing is, we are not in a position to take these theories in.

(Teacher C)

These comments clearly show participants' dissatisfaction with the knowledge-transmission style of INSET. On the contrary, regarding the intensive summer course part, some positive remarks about the courses practicality were addressed from both Teacher B and C, as exemplified in Teacher B's words as follows:

I need a very practical "how to teach" approach. A very practical one.... the summer course part fits what I wanted. If they provide me with more examples of effective activities, for example...I would really appreciate that.

(Teacher B)

This statement by teacher B illustrates not only teachers' preferred learning styles, but also an interesting feature of their psychology. That is, although she conceives that "practical" activities might be more suitable for their INSET, what she wants from INSET still tends to adhere to a transmission style, e.g., "if they *provide* me..." This indicates that the notion of action research has not permeated among schoolteachers.

In order to provide contextually sensitive INSET, which brings about effectiveness, the session should tackle the trainee's areas of concern, not "possible concern" for teachers "in general". That means that lecture providers are expected to be familiar with the school cultures which participants are engaged in. Needs analysis would be one way of doing this. This relates to one of the conditions of "successful INSET" mentioned earlier, which is "a program which is oriented towards experience, practice and action..." The lectures can and should mediate between theory and practice more

efficiently by selecting and presenting the content carefully. In the present case the organizer, in fact, did observe participants' motivation in INSET. As a consequence, he came to realize the need to shift to a more "contextually sensitive" approach, which stimulates reflection on the part of each individual teacher, aiming to construct his/her own understanding of the theory using their past experience. He stated:

Maybe we should have put more emphasis on "practice", such as "practical methodology" that focuses on the lower secondary school classroom in particular. Maybe it would be better if teachers have a discussion *in Japanese*, searching for how to plan effective lessons for students...I think I need a little bit of tuning up for the following years...

(The organizer)

If the organizer is willing to bring about more discussion among teachers on relevant topics which "fit" teachers' contexts more, as he describes above, it would be possible to expand the idea into the implementation of Action Research at an institutional level, which may be the vehicle for a conscious acceptance of theory by teachers as practitioners.

Summary

In relation to the conditions for successful INSET reviewed earlier, the *Intensive INSET* has been successful in some respects but not in others. The summarized findings of the study regarding selected questions in this paper are as follows:

- Collaborative planning between the organizer and the participants, utilizing feedback from Pilot INSET, was successful in the sense that the proportion of time allocated for the theoretical and practical parts (summer intensive program) was modified to fifty-fifty by the organizer. This provided a program with much more variety in comparison with former INSET events that mainly focused on theory

transmission.

- The approach of both lectures and summer intensive program basically followed a top-down approach, which could overlook the significance of individual classroom reflection. Realizing the lack of bottom-up approaches, the organizer is now considering involving a more reflective approach, e.g., discussion in Japanese, bringing their experience, which can include an element of Action Research.
- The organizer is in the process of planning devised active involvement of participants in the lectures. However, the lectures held before and after the summer intensive course were not perceived as positively as they were intended to be. In spite of the organizer's consideration, e.g., asking lecturers to involve teachers in discussion, teachers were not "ready" to be active participants. Moreover, a clear focus upon participants' needs according to their school context was perceived not to have been achieved. There was a call for practicability in the content of lectures that would be relevant to classroom teaching, which is oriented toward experience and action. By achieving it, theory can turn into reachable goals for participants, and can therefore be beneficial to individual classroom teaching.

References

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Appendix 1: Schedule of the program (2004)

	Date	Descriptions	Charge	Duration
1	28 May	Orientation / English Proficiency Test	Teacher consultant, BoE	4 hours
2	11 June	Lecture and Workshop 'Communicative Reading'	University lecturer	4 hours
3	26 July	Lecture 'Methods of Evaluation'	Teacher from a State School	3 hours
		Lecture 'How to motivate learners'	University lecturer	4 hours
4	2 Aug	Summer Intensive Course – 30-hours Program to develop the English skills through communicative activities <i>(held in vacation time)</i> <i>*See Appendix2 for detail</i>	Two language teachers from Berlitz (private language school)	30 hours (6 hours a day)
5	3 Aug			
6	4 Aug			
7	5 Aug			
8	6 Aug			
9	11 Nov	Lecture and Workshop 'Communicative Reading 2'	University lecturer	4 hours
10	11 Jan	Lecture 'Language Acquisition Theory and English language Education'	University lecturer	3 hours
		English Language Proficiency Test 2	BoE	4 hours

(Sapporo City BoE, 2004)

Appendix 2: Content of summer intensive course

SUMMER INTENSIVE COURSE 30-hour Program

	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday
Morning Session	Introductions Activity 1: <i>Let's mingle!</i>	Restaurants and Food Activity 1: <i>Where shall we eat?</i>	Hobbies and Activities Activity 1: <i>What's your hobby?</i>	Our Neighbourhood Activity 1: <i>How's your new place?</i>	Health Matters Activity 1: <i>Why don't you try...?</i>
	Activity 2: <i>Object feast</i>	Activity 2: <i>How do you make that?</i>	Activity 2: <i>Magazine-based activity</i>	Activity 2: <i>The apartment search</i>	Activity 2: <i>Magazine-based activity</i>
	<i>Lunch</i>	<i>Lunch</i>	<i>Lunch</i>	<i>Lunch</i>	<i>Lunch</i>
Afternoon Session	Talking about Work Activity 1: <i>What do you do?</i>	Shopping Activity 1: <i>It's a bargain!</i>	Travel and vacations Activity 1: <i>That place looks great!</i>	Talking about the news Activity 1: <i>Did you see the news?</i>	Presentations
	Activity 2: <i>DVD-based activity</i>	Activity 2: <i>Magazine-based activity</i>	Activity 2: <i>DVD-based activity</i>	Activity 2: <i>Magazine based activity</i>	Presentations

(Sapporo City BoE, 2004)

Appendix 3: Content of the interview with the organizer

- 1 Could you explain the background of the implementation of the *Intensive INSET*? What is the relevancy to the 2003 Action Plan?
- 2 Could you describe the detailed content of the *Intensive INSET*? Please describe the balance of theory and practice in particular.
- 3 It is a fact that legal force is getting stronger in terms of the attendance of INSET. The 2003 Action Plan made the intensive INSET compulsory for all teachers nationwide. How do you find the reaction of teachers in general? Are they reluctant or motivated when they are 'forced' to participate?
- 4 Could you illustrate the process of design of the *Intensive INSET*? Who participated as decision makers in designing? How was the process in terms of 1) selection of content/provider of lectures 2) selection of content/material/teachers of training activities? How long did it take to plan?
- 5 Could you describe the Pilot INSET last year? How did you choose participants and what was the content of the INSET?
- 6 Did you receive any feedback from participants of the Pilot INSET? If so, in what form? Could you describe the content of the feedback? How did you make use of it?
- 7 The TOEIC-like exam might have seemed sensational since no such a test was implemented in former INSET before. What is the aim of the exam? Does BoE (Board of Education) keep the score of teachers?
- 8 I have heard that teachers had autonomy in choosing their class (intermediate or advanced) according to the TOEIC-like exam. Why did you not take the initiative in classifying teachers into two groups?
- 9 As for the summer intensive course, what is the rationale of hiring language teachers from outside (Berlitz)? Why not ALTs (Assistant Language Teacher)?
- 10 What is the student-teacher ratio for the summer intensive course?
- 11 Do you plan to obtain some feedback after the *Intensive INSET*? If so, how would you like to make use of them?

Appendix 4: Content of the interview to the three teachers undertaking either *The Intensive INSET* or 5-Nen-ken

- 1 Could you convey the overall impression of the undergoing INSET? Do you think it is helpful?
- 2 Please describe each lecture and give me your impression toward it. Do you think the content was relevant to your classroom teaching? If yes, how / in particular, which session? If no, why do you think so?
- 3 Please illustrate the summer intensive course and give me your impression toward it. Do you think the content was relevant to your classroom teaching? If yes, how / in particular, what activities or training? If no, why do you think so?
- 4 Were / Are you motivated in 'learning' 1) before 2) during 3) after the INSET? Why is it so?
- 5 I have heard that there are two classes for the summer intensive course (intermediate and advanced). Which class were you in? What do you think about the way of organizing classes into two? Do you think it was effective?
- 6 Have you found any specific good/ bad part of the INSET you are undergoing now, *especially in comparison with* other INSET you have participated before?
- 7 Please describe any possible obstacles that have made you unmotivated toward 'teacher learning', or attending the INSET in particular, for example, busy schedule. How does it make situation difficult? Do you have any demands for BoE / the INSET organizer to remedy these problems?