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In-Service TEFL – Is it Worth the Risk?

by *Brian Tomlinson*

1. Assumption

It seems to be universally taken for granted that it is necessary and worthwhile to run short, intensive courses to bring teachers of TEFL up to date. It is assumed that teachers cannot independently cope with the incessant flood of new theories, ideas and materials in TEFL and that the best way to help them is to bring them together in a lecture room or classroom to receive new information. This is the assumption behind the short "refresher" courses run by universities and language schools, by ministries of education and by British Council "spec tourists" all over the world. For twenty years I have been helping to run such courses and have been fairly confident that I have been successful in providing positive stimulus to most of the teachers I have worked with. Now I am not so sure. Many of them might have gone back to their schools feeling refreshed and possibly even inspired; but how many of them really gained anything of any lasting value from the courses? And how much did they lose?

My growing fears that short in-service courses are potentially dangerous have been reinforced by meetings and correspondence with ex-participants of such courses who feel guilty and inadequate because they have not been able to do what their courses inspired them to try, and in particular, by my current experience on the PKG Project in Indonesia. For the first time in my career I have had the opportunity to really find out the effects of in-service courses I have run or observed. Three times a year I run in-service workshops for the same group of teacher trainers from all over the country. Twice a year these teacher trainers run 16 week in-on service courses for experienced teachers in their provinces. For two weeks the teachers do a very intensive course in the provincial capital and then they return to their schools for six weeks. During these six weeks they attend weekly meetings with their teacher trainers in their provincial capital and they are observed by them at least five times in their schools. Then they return for another two weeks intensive courses and finally they spend another six weeks teaching in their schools, being observed and attending weekly meetings. A lot has been achieved using this system but I am absolutely convinced that it would have been disastrous for the teacher trainers or the teachers to have just done one in-service course. The motivation and stimulus they had gained would soon have been negated by the confusion and frustration they would have suffered in trying to apply all that they had learned and the guilt and inadequacy they would have felt as a result of their almost inevitable failure to accommodate a new approach within the existing parameters of syllabus, examinations, materials, official expectations and class size. Yet this is what teachers all over the world are expected to do after leaving in-service courses. At least on the PKG Project we have a chance to make the confusion positive by using feedback on real teaching to increase understanding and to encourage gradual independence of thought and application.

2. The Dangers of Short In-Service Courses

The result of attending a short, in-service course for many participants is that they:-

- a) resist the new ideas because they feel they have been unfairly attacked for using old-fashioned methods and materials; OR
- b) fear and reject the new ideas because they see them as a threat to the self-esteem and security they have built up over many years; OR
- c) dissociate themselves from the new ideas for fear of being seen as radical and subversive by the authorities in their system; OR

- d) are persuaded to try the new ideas and then feel guilty when they abandon them after their initial failures to apply them successfully in the classroom; OR
- e) are so convinced of the value of their new wisdom that they rush back to their schools with revolutionary zeal and unthinkingly impose methods and materials from their in-service course on their bewildered students before having to revert to their "old" approach when the received supply of materials and ideas runs out; OR
- f) become total converts to the new approach and fail to see the inappropriacy of some of its aspects to the realities of their teaching situation.

3. Causes of the Damage

- a) The tutors are academics who have considerable theoretical knowledge of their field but have little or no experience of teaching in situations similar to those faced by the participants.
- b) The tutors are outsiders who have no experience or knowledge of the specific local situation.
- c) The tutors alienate the participants by assuming superiority.
- d) The tutors do not acknowledge or make use of the experience of the teachers.
- e) The tutors rely on charismatic performance to entertain, stimulate and persuade without involving the participants in thinking for themselves.
- f) The tutors are so evangelical that they gain some over-zealous converts whilst alienating the rest of the participants.
- g) The objectives are content-orientated (e.g. "To give the participants information about TPR") rather than behavioral (e.g. "To help the participants to work out ways of using the principles of TPR when teaching Class SMP 1 in Indonesia").
- h) The course provides only, theoretical information without helping the participants to apply it.
- i) The course provides theoretical information plus a few examples of materials which become inflexible models in the minds of the participants.
- j) The course provides lots of recipes for the participants to follow but does not help them to develop ideas and materials of their own.
- k) The course gives the impression that there is only one right way to do things and does not provide options to choose from and develop.
- l) The course only gives and the participants only receive.
- m) There is no focus or cohesion to the course and it moves from topic to topic without connection.
- n) There are too many tutors providing separate specialist bits.
- o) Too much new information is presented in the course.
- p) Too much new information is presented in each session without any attempt to reinforce, recycle or relate information.
- q) The course is far too ambitious and attempts to effect a radical change in teacher behaviour in a few short weeks.

- r) The authorities wish to give the appearance of keeping up to date but make sure no radical change results by not providing adequate time, incentive or resources.
- s) The course contradicts the principles of humanism, interaction, self access, relaxation and independence which it is recommending to the participants.
- t) There is no follow up to the course. the teachers receive no further support or encouragement. the teachers are not helped to actually apply the ideas they have been given.

4. Conclusions

Running any short in-service course is a risk. There is a very good chance that many of the participants will lose more than they will gain. In order to minimize the risk of loss of morale, confidence and competence it is important to ensure that:

- a) the objectives are specific, limited and behavioral;
- b) the course is designed to achieve continuity and coherence;
- c) the content of the course is limited and has a specific focus;
- d) the tutors have up-to-date knowledge of developments in the field AND experience of teaching in similar situations to those of the participants AND experience or awareness of the specific local situations of the participants;
- e) the experience and expertise of the participants is acknowledged and made use of;
- f) the course applies the principles of inter-active and humanistic learning theories;
- g) the course is EXPERIENTIAL and not just informative;

In order to ensure that the course actually benefits many of the participants it is also important to ensure that:

- h) the course is followed up by a monitoring and guidance service to the participants.

This can be achieved by:-

- i) running on-service courses which involve individual classroom observation and constructive feedback plus group discussion and planning;
- ii) setting up a correspondence support service which enables teachers to receive feedback on lesson plans, materials, problems, ideas and recordings and/or descriptions of lessons;
- iii) holding regular regional self-help meetings of the in-service participants to which the in-service tutors are sometimes invited;
- iv) setting up correspondence and telephone self-help groups among the participants;
- v) setting up small regional teams to monitor each other's lessons and materials;
- vi) inviting the same participants back for a follow up course the following year.

Whatever happens, the in-service course must be seen as the BEGINNING of a process of teacher development and not the end.