Cascade training and teachers' professional development

David Hayes

In their concern with 'improved' curricula and 'more effective' teaching-learning methods, education ministries often use the 'cascade' model to attempt to effect large-scale change at the classroom level. Experience of cascades in in-service development has tended to show, however, that the cascade is more often reduced to a trickle by the time it reaches the classroom teacher, on whom the success of curricular change depends. This paper examines the experience of a nationwide in-service teacher development project in Sri Lanka which aims to remedy the potential deficiencies of cascade models of teacher development. It shows how project training and development strategies which are context sensitive, collaborative, and reflexive seek to involve teachers in managing their own professional growth, while at the same time taking account of frameworks agreed at the national level. In this way a cascade model of training may promote genuine development rather than surface adherence to official mandates.

Introduction

This paper discusses the diffusion of innovation in English teaching at primary level in Sri Lanka. The introduction of innovation into any system is an undertaking fraught with potential difficulty. Most established systems—and those in education are no exception—tend to be conservative by nature, so inertia is a major characteristic. Innovations are often seen as threats to stakeholders in the system: any disturbance to the status quo may have unforeseen and possibly damaging consequences. The scale and scope of an innovation too, is, something that may not have been the result of consultation with those who have to implement it. As such, the innovation may be well grounded in theory but alien to current practice, and take little account of the practicalities of the process of change for individuals at a personal level. Havelock and Huberman warn that a key factor in the adoption of any innovation lies in the answer to the question 'What changes does this mean I personally have to make?' They comment:

It is important to understand that innovations are not adopted by people on the basis of the intrinsic value of the innovation, but rather on the basis of the adopters' perception of the changes they personally will be required to make. Those designing, administering and advising projects do not generally have to make very many changes themselves. Their task remains the same. It is others who will have to modify their behaviours and very often to modify them rapidly in fairly significant ways, and with little previous or even gradual preparation. These are typically the kind of rapid and massive changes which planners or
administrators or advisers would never plan, administer or advise for themselves. (Havelock and Huberman, cited in Bishop 1986: 5)

There is a tendency, however, for curricular change in education systems worldwide to encompass 'rapid and massive changes'. In so doing, nothing other than surface adherence to the language of the innovations can be guaranteed (Prabhu 1987)—and that only in situations where 'power-coercive' strategies (discussed in Bishop 1986: 20–2) for introducing innovation are utilized. Yet, as Markee (1997: 39–41) says, there are a variety of factors that need to be taken account of when introducing innovation:

Curricular innovation is a complex, multidimensional phenomenon. ... it is a socially situated activity that is affected by ethical and systemic constraints, the personal characteristics of potential adopters, the attributes of innovations, and the strategies that are used to manage change in a particular context.

It should be clear then that, if any innovation is to have a chance of moving from the planner's desk to the classroom, the process needs to be carefully managed.

Managing innovation: sources of behaviour

It needs to be recognized that teachers are at the heart of any innovation within national education systems and, therefore, that they and the contexts in which they work need to be studied to inform the innovation process. Obvious though that may seem, the traditional concerns of EFL teaching (and research on teaching) have been with the nature of language, the nature of language learning, and the relationship of these to methodologies. Recognition that the social context of teaching and learning is equally important has come late to the EFL world (see for example Holliday, 1994; Coleman, 1997). It is surprising that this should be so, given that research from other areas of teaching has for some time contended

that it is not enough to know what it is that teachers do that affects learning. It is also necessary to understand why and how this occurs in terms of both the social macro-context and the micro-context of the classroom situation.

(Avalos 1985: 290)

Further, there remains within TEFL/TESOL an urgent need to investigate this 'why and how' from the diverse perspectives of teachers themselves (Hayes, 1996). In this vein, Avalos (1985: 293) criticizes much research on teaching for its behaviourist orientation, neglecting the sources of behaviour that lie in the personal histories of the actors:

Only recently have studies within the phenomenological and ethnographic perspectives begun to document classroom life, to examine the ways in which teachers conceive their teaching and see their pupils, and to look at what shapes their views, their decision-making, and their efforts to change.

(Avalos 1985: 293)
Avalos finds support for his views in Carew and Lightfoot (1979: 21):

They have been content to represent life in classrooms by describing actions and interaction, and in the process they have often ignored the character, motivations, attitudes, and values of the actors... Teachers are thought of as one-dimensional human beings whose behavior is determined by patterns of reward and punishment. They are viewed as technicians who perform specific actions on children, who in turn are seen as essentially passive human beings to be shaped and controlled by powerful adults.
(Carew and Lightfoot, 1979: 21)

Given that the mechanism by which much innovation in education continues to be introduced is in-service teacher-training/development (INSET), there is a particular need to address Avalos’ criticisms with regard to its context. I have myself begun to place INSET activities within their wider socio-educational context as well as viewing them from the perspectives of the teachers who are supposed to ‘change’ as a result (Hayes 1997). From this exploratory research it is clear that it is not internal course features which are the sole determinants of the success of INSET:

... the teacher’s own personal disposition towards change may be a key variable. This argues for the widest possible perspective to be taken on all INSET activities. We will miss much by focusing only on courses, we will miss less if we also consider the school context of implementation, but we will only arrive at anything like a full understanding of the processes of in-service teacher development if we consider the teacher’s personal biography, situated within its socio-educational context.
(Hayes, ibid.: 83)

Where does this leave the in-service innovator? This kind of qualitative research is obviously very time-consuming to carry out, so what can be done when a felt need for innovation has to be translated into practice? As a basic minimum, we would hope that the innovators had at the very least consulted with the community within which innovation was to take place (parents, teachers, children). If this has been done, one can then begin to plan strategies for introducing innovation to the teachers who have to implement it with some assurance of receiving a favourable reception.

Strategies for introducing innovation: ‘cascades’

A strategy often adopted for introducing major innovations into educational systems is the ‘cascade’ model, in which training is conducted at several levels by trainers drawn from a level above. This has a number of theoretical benefits which make it attractive to planners of change on a large scale. ‘It is cost effective, it does not require long periods out of service, and it uses existing teaching staff as co-trainers.’ (Gilpin, 1997: 185) However, using trainers drawn from successive tiers of the cascade also has potential disadvantages, the principal one being dilution of the training—less and less is understood the further one goes...
down the cascade. Yet it is not the cascade model *per se* which is the problem, but the manner in which it is often implemented. A prime cause of failure is concentration of expertise at the topmost levels of the cascade, allied to a purely transmissive mode of training at all levels. Active participation in the change at all levels is, then, a *sine qua non* of successful cascade training.

Positive instances of cascade training can be found which remedy such deficiencies. One such is detailed in Mwirotsi *et al.* (1997) discussing the training of headteachers in Kenya. Their explicit intention was to reduce dilution in training and weaknesses in monitoring by employing a strengthened cascade system which led to decentralization of responsibilities and an ability to self-regulate the process (ibid.: 7) Further, the mode of training was not transmissive but experiential and reflective:

At every cascade level ... as part of the training process, daily sessions on reflection were included. Trainers were required to consider the relevance of what they learned and to think how best their new found knowledge, skills and competences could be adapted and applied to their own local situation as they listened to and reflected on other views. (ibid.: 8)

Reinterpretation of the training experience rather than unthinking acceptance was thus a key factor, something to be welcomed rather than to be feared. Important also was involvement of a cross-section of stakeholders in the production of training materials. This was to counter a potential weakness identified elsewhere, in a British cascade programme for a new examination, where:

There were also some doubts about the relevance of the materials, which, if they were not prepared in consultation with the very trainers who were targeted, would lose their impact at an early stage in the cascade system.

(ibid.: 9)

To sum up, for cascade training to be successful, there appear to be a number of key criteria which the programme should take into account:

- the method of conducting the training must be experiential and reflective rather than transmissive;
- the training must be open to reinterpretation; rigid adherence to prescribed ways of working should not be expected;
- expertise must be diffused through the system as widely as possible, not concentrated at the top;
- a cross-section of stakeholders must be involved in the preparation of training materials;
- decentralisation of responsibilities within the cascade structure is desirable.
In relation to these criteria I would now like to discuss a trainer and teacher development programme in which I am currently engaged, the Sri Lanka Primary English Language Project (PELP).

The key characteristic of PELP is participation throughout the system. As well as ownership by institutional stakeholders—DFID, the Ministry, provincial officials, and so on—it is a basic tenet that development strategies must promote a sense of ownership in teachers and trainers of the programmes in which they are involved and the centres through which they operate. Without this, sustainability is unlikely. Accordingly, the project holds to a number of basic principles.

**Participative development**

We seek to maximize the potential of everyone in the cascade—from the project manager to the coordinators to teachers in school. In order for this to happen, we must all be active agents in our own development.

**Context sensitivity**

In order to provide the most appropriate training at all levels of the project, training and development strategies are informed by continuing examination of the training, teaching, and learning context, and are sensitive to emerging features of context.
Normative re-educative models of training

A transmission model of training is inconsistent with a programme which seeks to develop a sense of ownership at the grass-roots level amongst teachers and trainers. The project therefore, utilizes, participatory 'normative re-educative strategies' (Chin and Benne, cited in Bishop, 1986: 16) which examine principles underlying the use of classroom or workshop activities, evaluate the effectiveness of existing practice, and use this heightened awareness as a basis for modifications in that practice.

Reflexivity

Training and development activities within the project are reflexive, applying at all levels of the teaching–learning system. Courses for trainers model features of courses for teachers; these, in turn, model features of classroom instruction.

Classroom-centredness

For teachers to adopt different methods of teaching English at the primary level they need to be sure that these methods will bring benefits both to themselves and their learners. Teacher development activities are, accordingly, classroom-centred; they have direct relevance to teachers everyday school situations, and are essentially practical. Though practice is informed by theory, an understanding of theory alone is insufficient as an agent of long-term change. RESC training directly confronts issues raised in the teaching–learning of English in primary schools.

Collaboration

Collaboration is vital at all levels of the training system. RESCs develop self-supporting networks; they also encourage teachers to co-operate at school-cluster level, as well as within individual schools. RESCs work as teams on training modules and guidebooks, involving teachers wherever possible.

Responsiveness

RESCs work within a common framework, but they are encouraged to provide a flexible response to the needs of the teachers in their regions.

Continuing professional development

Learning does not finish once trainers or teachers leave a course. They must continue the process of adapting to the new in their own RESCs or their own classrooms. Supportive workshop and classroom observation and counselling can ease this process, but it is recognized that not every trainer nor every teacher can be offered such support on demand. Self-appraisal skills must, therefore, form an important part of a trainer's or teacher's repertoire. Trainer and teacher development courses seek, accordingly, to develop a heightened degree of reflectiveness and critical awareness in participants.

These principles can be matched against our criteria for successful cascades, as in Table 1.
### Table 1 Criteria and project principles

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Criteria</th>
<th>Project training principles</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. The method of conducting the training must be experiential and reflective rather than transmissive.</td>
<td>- Context sensitivity &lt;br&gt;- ‘Normative re-educative’ models of training &lt;br&gt;- Reflexivity</td>
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<tr>
<td>2. The training must be open to reinterpretation; rigid adherence to prescribed ways of working should not be expected.</td>
<td>- Context sensitivity &lt;br&gt;- ‘Normative re-educative’ models of training &lt;br&gt;- Reflexivity &lt;br&gt;Flexibility and responsiveness to local needs continuing professional development</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Expertise must be diffused through the system as widely as possible, not concentrated at the top.</td>
<td>- Participative development &lt;br&gt;- Collaboration &lt;br&gt;- Continuing professional development</td>
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<td>4. A cross-section of stakeholders must be involved in the preparation of training materials.</td>
<td>- Participative development &lt;br&gt;- Collaboration</td>
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<tr>
<td>5. Decentralization of responsibilities within the cascade structure is desirable.</td>
<td>- Flexibility and responsiveness to local needs &lt;br&gt;- Collaboration</td>
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The principles are operationalized in project activities, of which trainer development seminars (run jointly by the project manager and project coordinators) are central to sustainability.

**Seminar themes**

When the first in this series of seminars was being developed, several underpinning themes were identified as being important. These were:

1. **All teaching and training occurs in a social context.**<br>We needed to make explicit the socially-constructed nature of any education system; and that context was something which we hoped to have an impact upon, as well as recognizing at the same time that project activities had to be shaped by context.

2. **Developing as trainers; developing as teachers.**<br>It was thought to be vital to emphasise that training and teaching were mutually dependent. One does not stop developing as a teacher when one becomes a trainer.

3. **Learning (at any level) is easier when we are motivated.**<br>Theorists often talk of the importance of motivation in learning languages: this is no less true of the learning that takes place on a teacher or trainer development course.

4. **Learning (at any level) is easier when we are actively engaged.**<br>Here we were extending the precept of activity-based learning to trainer and teacher development.

5. **All teaching and training activities/tasks should have a context and a clear purpose.**<br>Grounding of teaching, and training in a context appropriate to the
children, the teachers, or the trainers was seen to be an essential prerequisite of successful learning; as was making the reasons for doing something transparent to those who had to do it.

6 Learners (at any level) may need to be helped to develop strategies for active, involved learning.

We cannot presume that trainers, teachers, or children used to transmissive modes of education will automatically know 'how to learn in an activity-based way. Learner-training may be required to support the new modes of learning.

7 Children, teachers, and trainers need to be respected as individuals.

As well as being, for us, a self-evident truth, this also counters the criticism of research cited by Avalos earlier, that teachers are viewed as 'technicians who perform specific actions on children, who in turn are seen as essentially passive human beings to be shaped and controlled by powerful adults'. (Carew and Lightfoot, cited by Avalos, 1985: 293)

The seminar themes can be related to the training and development principles as follows:

- Context-sensitivity: themes 1 and 5
- Reflexivity: themes 2, 3, and 4
- Collaboration: themes 6 and 7
- Continuing professional development: theme 2

Implementation of the principles of 'classroom-centredness' together with 'flexibility and responsiveness to local needs' can be found in the outline of the seminar topics below, which combined a focus on teaching skills with a focus on training skills (I do not intend the use of the word 'skills' to imply a purely technical approach to development).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Training focus: topics</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>How children learn languages</td>
<td>The 'average’ primary school</td>
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<tr>
<td>Teaching adults and teaching children</td>
<td>Aims for the future</td>
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<tr>
<td>Course frameworks</td>
<td>Making the classroom a more stimulating learning environment</td>
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<td>Course and task objectives</td>
<td>Analysis (on video) of an EFL classroom: problems and opportunities</td>
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<tr>
<td>Task types</td>
<td>Groupwork in the primary classroom: roles, organization, and activities</td>
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<tr>
<td>Writing materials</td>
<td>Controlling your experience: targets for change</td>
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In turn, one of the outcomes of the seminar was a 'checklist' for RESC courses, jointly constructed by tutors and the RESC trainers—using and reinterpreting knowledge gained during other tasks, and also reflecting the principles discussed earlier.

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A checklist for RESC courses

Does the training/development session provide/enable:
- active involvement/participation by the teachers?
- opportunities for thinking/reflection?
- opportunity to make use of teachers' own experience?
- opportunity to experience ideas/activities at first hand?
- opportunity to apply ideas?
- opportunity for practice of skills in a non-threatening environment?
- constructive feedback on practice/application?
- an emphasis on why: the reasons for doing something in a particular way?

And finally:
- Is there a variety of methods/tasks used on the course?

This process of relating criteria to principles, themes, and topics of training/development activities could be repeated for all courses at whatever level of the system. Taken together, the project activities seek to ensure that the criteria for an effective cascade system are met. We could also analyse activities—trainer or teacher development courses—at the task level to see how they operationalize the principles and conform to the criteria at the micro-level; but such an analysis is beyond the scope of this paper.

Nor is there space to do more than touch on the project experience of materials development as this relates to the fourth criterion: 'A cross-section of stakeholders must be involved in the preparation of training materials.' Suffice it to say that for all three levels of materials in preparation as part of project activities—trainer development materials; teacher development materials; and teachers' guides—there is cooperation and joint development of materials by project coordinators, trainers, and teachers. All are being encouraged to develop to their maximum potential and, as part of that process, they are also being encouraged to foster a reflective capacity in themselves. It is significant that the Grade 1 Teacher's Guide has a section on 'Teacher Self-Evaluation', and that one of the topics on the first trainer development course was 'Controlling your experience: targets for change'. A reflective orientation is central to development. We believe that all teachers, whether actively or passively, determine what is appropriate for their own classrooms. In so doing they take account of national education policies and recommended teaching methods. However, experience shows that even a national, prescribed curriculum will be interpreted in different ways by individual teachers. The goal of any teacher development programme, therefore must be, to give teachers the power—in the form of knowledge, skills, interpretive frameworks and a reflective disposition—to make informed choices about how best to teach in their own classes (taking into account such things as a national curriculum). All training and teaching–learning materials must, then, support that goal.
It is incumbent upon any project to demonstrate that expenditure has some tangible effect. Within PELP, impact assessment is itself a developmental, collaborative exercise. RESC trainers are not only involved in the development of the instruments but are also its principal agents. They assess children’s language competence through one-to-one conversations and story-reading; they observe teachers in schools and they engage in peer observation during workshops. From analysis of data collected to date, major statistically-significant findings reveal that:

- children taught by RESC-trained teachers perform better than children taught by non-RESC-trained teachers; and
- the classroom behaviour of teachers who have participated in RESC courses is more learner-centred and activity-based (as required by the new curriculum) than that of teachers who have not had such training.

In this paper I have examined criteria for the success of cascade training programmes and related these to the experience of one such programme in Sri Lanka, the Primary English Language Project. I think it is clear that, because of their advantages to planners in terms of cost and use of human and material resources, cascade training programmes will remain a feature of educational systems for some time to come. This is especially so where attempts at large-scale innovation are being effected in under-resourced situations. Given this, it behoves all of us engaged in cascade programmes to ensure that the training provided meets the needs of recipients at all levels. This can only be done if the criteria identified earlier are met. To reiterate:

- the method of conducting the training must be experiential and reflective rather than transmissive;
- the training must be open to reinterpretation; rigid adherence to prescribed ways of working should not be expected;
- expertise must be diffused through the system as widely as possible, not concentrated at the top;
- a cross-section of stakeholders must be involved in the preparation of training materials;
- decentralization of responsibilities within the cascade structure is desirable.

**Note**

1 An example of this is evident in a report in *The Bangkok Post* of 20 March 1998, where it is reported in connection with the introduction of English into the first year of primary schooling that ‘A recent department [of curriculum and instruction] survey also showed that while most administrators favoured the policy, teachers doubted its practicality.’

**References**


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