Identifying and Meeting the Needs of Thai University Teachers of English

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Various types of evidence regarding the needs of Thai university teachers of English are presented and discussed. Although further research is necessary, it is argued that one can already be reasonably certain that the major training need of such teachers is in pedagogic and to a lesser extent, professional skills. (Appropriately-angled academic content also has a place.) For such needs to be adequately met, it is a *sine qua non* that teacher training courses be devised specifically to meet them. To this end, a framework for thinking through the content of such courses is presented, and proposals for an effective training methodology are also made.

What kinds of knowledge and abilities do Thai university teachers of English need? The first part of this paper attempts to answer this question, drawing on some of the available evidence. In the second part, the relevant question is "How can the needs of university English teachers be met?", and tentative answers are proposed here also.

First, what are the needs? Unfortunately, it has to be emphasized straightaway that a full-scale investigation of Thai university English teachers' needs has yet to be carried out. Any attempt to adequately identify and cater for the full range of needs should be underpinned by such a study. As will be evident from what follows, this is particularly necessary with regard to the needs of teachers involved in English major programmes. Even among teachers involved in non-English major work (i.e., teachers of courses for students of, e.g. Engineering, Medicine, Economics, etc.), more comprehensive research is needed. However, although it is necessary to be careful not to over-generalize, it is also true that a certain amount of reasonably reliable evidence does exist, and it is possible, perhaps, to extrapolate from these findings to at least a limited extent, as I will try to show. So, on to "exhibit A"!

In 1983, as part of the preparations for the launch of the *MA in Applied Linguistics for EST* programme at King Mongkut's Institute of Technology, Thonburi, we asked teachers of English in a number of university institutions[1] to state what topics they thought should be included in such an MA. In the first part of the questionnaire a list of possible topics was provided, and respondents had to indicate their preferences by ticking boxes on a scale from 5 (highest preference) to 1 (lowest preference). The results, calculated as means, and ranked in descending order of overall preference, are shown in Table 1.

Table 1 : Preferences for MA in EST topics

Topics	Means
a) Materials writing (including adaptation)	4.7
b) Materials evaluation	4.6
c) Course design	4.5
d) Communicative classroom teaching techniques	4.4
e) Lesson planning	4.4
f) Testing	4.4
g) Programme development	4.2
h) Course and teaching evaluation	4.1
i) Language skills development	3.9
j) Study skills development	3.8
k) Basic principles of science and technology	3.8
l) Research methods in language teaching	3.8
m) Psychology of language learning	3.7
n) Management of classroom resources	3.7
o) Language description/analysis and language teaching	3.6
p) Historical survey of main approaches to language learning and teaching	3.4

There appears to be a generally positive attitude to all the topics, given that the range between the highest and lowest means is relatively small, and that the figure for the lowest mean is still well above the mid-point on the rating scale. Nevertheless, it is possible to detect a relatively stronger preference for "professional" topics--that is, matters to do with materials, course design, and so on (e.g. items a-c)--than for more "pedagogic" ones (i.e., ones more directly concerned with teaching, e.g. items d, e, i and n). Seen as being of relatively least importance are topics of a more "academic" nature (e.g. items l, m, o and p).

The second part of the questionnaire asked respondents to list any other topics they thought were important : the suggestions made were predominantly for further pedagogic and professional ones, in roughly equal proportions. The third part asked what problems, faced by university teachers of EST, an MA in EST should help to solve : again, responses centred mainly on pedagogic and professional concerns.

As a second source of evidence, Teo's (1986) description of the needs of university teachers of EST can be cited. In her analysis, "effective teaching" is seen as the superordinate need. She also argues that the other main areas of need[2] should be seen not as ends in themselves, but primarily in terms of the contribution they can make to meeting the number one requirement : enhanced teaching ability. In Teo's picture, thus, it is pedagogic needs which predominate.

Another useful and widely available source of information about university English teachers' needs are the articles published in journals such as *PASAA* itself, *KMIT's EST Bulletin*, *Thai/TESOL's Annual Convention Papers*, and so on. Although the majority of these papers do not set out to address the issue of teacher training needs directly, it is possible, by patient detective work, to *infer* a great deal of this kind of information from them. For example, an article in a recent issue of *Studies in Language and Language Teaching* (Vanikieti and Keyuravong, 1986) analyzes various key problems in developing an effective ESP curriculum at Mahidol University. The problems include :

"1. Lack of clearly stated program aims and course objectives.
2. Administrative factors.
3. Courses being neither graded nor continuous.
4. Confinement of much teaching to the lower stages of the language learning process.
5. Ineffective materials making process.
6. Lack of provision for fast and slow learners.
7. Student passivity in class.
8. Ineffectiveness of outside reading programme and homework assignments.
9. Lack of meaningful student and teacher interaction in class."

(pp. 43-4)

Although a rather mixed bag of issues, one can once again detect a strong need for training in professional and pedagogic skills.

To view from these sources one can add those of personnel involved in the in-service training of university teachers of English. Here, the evidence points overwhelmingly towards the need for training in pedagogic skills, i.e., teaching techniques. Teaching is the most frequent and educationally important activity that

university teachers of English engage in, yet, all too often, observation of teaching performance reveals that even very basic teaching skills are underdeveloped. Problems such as poor rapport, lack of variety, inappropriate timing, inadequate guidance, low level of student involvement, and so on, are widespread.

The various types of evidence reviewed so far point, then, in overall terms, towards pedagogic and professional skills as the main areas of training need (the question of academic content will be returned to later). However, it is important to bear in mind that, since the promotion system for university teachers of English is based mainly on their performance in professional skills (especially materials writing), they inevitably tend to rank their need for training in this area more highly than their urge to develop their teaching ability, as Table 1 indicates, and Teo (1986) notwithstanding. But the needs of teachers have to be set against those of the learners they are employed to serve. To meet the learners' needs, an army of course designers and materials writers is unnecessary, since one good course design and set of materials can be used by many teachers. But what *every* teacher *does* need to be able to do is to translate the course purposes and materials into enjoyable, rewarding learning experiences through skill in teaching. And, given the difficulties many teachers experience in doing this, it follows that it is actually to *pedagogic* needs that the highest priority should be given. Professional needs are also important, but secondary.

Most of what has been said so far has concerned only teachers of EST. However, it seems reasonable to assume that, because of the pre-eminence of EST within ESP, in quantitative and qualitative terms (Swales, 1985 : x), the needs of university teachers of other areas of ESP (e.g. for students of Business) are not dissimilar (although, ideally, this is a matter which should be systematically researched, of course).

However, even if we accept that the training needs of teachers of English to non-English majors can be known with a fair amount of certainty, what of those who teach English major students? As stated earlier, both in terms of lack of research and ready availability of other sources of information (e.g. professional papers), it is difficult to do more than speculate at present. However, it would not be unreasonable to look upon such teaching as, in fact, a form of ESP, i.e., English for English major purposes (I am, of course, thinking solely of the teaching of English language, not the teaching of English literature or the teaching of "English linguistics"). The teacher of English for English major purposes, surely, is likely to need a sound command of much the same set of skills that other university teachers of English require, the differences (e.g. level of personal proficiency in English, type of content, etc.) being of less significance than the similarities. .

Thus, a case exists--although it should be subjected to empirical verification--for regarding the basic training needs of *all* types of Thai university teachers of English as having a great deal in common.[3]

Having identified such needs, what type of training can best meet them? In what follows, I will touch on three main aspects of providing teacher training relevant to university English teachers: the *format* for the training, its *content*, and the training *methodology*. But first it is necessary to discuss what is, I believe, a superordinate issue, one which interpenetrates all the others, namely, the importance of basing the training on the needs of the trainees. Fortunately, needs-based English language teaching (i.e. ESP) has become standard practice over the last 20 years or so. However, for reasons that it would be interesting to investigate but which need not detain us, the idea of basing teacher training courses on a careful analysis of the trainees' needs is still relatively novel. Thus, we frequently encounter the disturbing paradox of trainees being urged to practice needs-based English language teaching by trainers who, themselves, show scant regard for their own trainees' needs! All too often, trainees who clearly need (and want), for example, to learn how to teach more effectively, are, instead, fed a diet of nothing but (highly unapplied) linguistics by their trainers! It strikes one that this tends to be particularly (though, unfortunately, by no means exclusively) true of MA-type training in English language teaching. Yet, an MA should, at root, be no different from any other kind of course: in other words, it should have the *actual* needs of its participants as its goal. An MA is not so much an MA because it contains a particular sort of content: it is an MA principally because of the particular treatment it gives that content. And it is an *educationally valuable* MA if-and *only* if-the content that it handles matches the real needs of the trainees. Thus, in short, a cardinal principle of training for university teachers of English (or any other group) should be: having found out the trainees' needs, build the training on them. All other concerns are secondary.

To come now to the issue of what *format* training for university teachers should take. The 1-2 week workshop or seminar is a popular local remedy: is it really capable, however, of doing the job? As Catherine Walter (BBC, 1985 : 70) says, there is a danger or "isolated seminars on this or that (being) what I would call the icing without the cake. People don't have the basis to build on and they get a bit of this and a bit of that and somebody coming for three days or a week to do this or that; and it ends up conferring a great vulnerability to passing fashion." So perhaps the advantages of the short seminar or workshop (relative cheapness, opportunity to be exposed to new ideas, etc.) are outweighed by disadvantages of the kind Walter describes, so far as relying on them to adequately meet the major needs of university English teachers is concerned. We all know

that learning a language such as English requires a lengthy period of sustained effort: why, therefore, should we expect that learning how to teach English and handle English teaching-related tasks (e.g. course design) effectively will be any different? Thus, it is to the lengthier types of training (B. Ed and MA courses) that we must look for the means to properly meet the university English teachers' needs. At present, unfortunately, the curricula of all too many such degree programmes do not give adequate preparation in the skills needed. Surely, however, some re-evaluation is possible. As a minimum, one or more B.Ed programmes could include an elective course on "Teaching ESP", in which basic ESP teaching techniques (such as how to generate effective communication with technical content), and so on, could be taught. The major need, however, is for far more work of real value on teaching skills *in general*.

Which brings us to the second main issue: what content should the training have? In the data described in the first part of this paper, it was pointed out that it is possible to discern three main categories of content, which were referred to as "pedagogic", "professional" and "academic".

By pedagogic content is meant topics to do with teaching techniques, testing, handling technical information, classroom language, materials evaluation, and so on: in other words, content more-or-less directly concerned with how to teach. Professional content, by which is meant content closely related to, but beyond teaching, comprises matters such as course and materials design, course evaluation, administration, etc. Academic content means topics to do with educational psychology, linguistics, research, and the like: that is, information and techniques for describing-and evaluating-the ideas about language and learning which underly ESP teaching.

These categories are not, of course, water-tight: they should be seen as no more than a rough and ready analytical framework for clarifying thinking in this area, full of overlap and imprecision, but better (perhaps) than nothing. (See Strevens, 1977: 74-7) for an excellent alternative classification.)
The following points can be made:

1. Which content areas and topics will be included in any particular training course will obviously depend on exactly who the trainees are, the time available, and so on. Given the analysis in the first part of this paper, however, it would be unusual if *pedagogic* content were not to predominate.

2. It does not make sense to mount courses with a high degree of professional content for trainees who have not yet thoroughly mastered pedagogic content, because, e.g. doing extensive materials writing presupposes a thorough knowledge of how to teach effectively.

3. Academic content needs to be seen less as an end in itself and much more in terms of its role in illuminating pedagogy. All English language teaching is ultimately based not just on methodology and materials, but on the ideas about language and learning which underly them. It follows that the teacher needs to know what such ideas involve, and how to evaluate their application in teaching. This is where academic content has an important part to play[4].

Finally, methodology. Just as there has long been an unwarranted insensitivity to content relevance in some teacher training work, so, too, there has sometimes been insufficient thought given to the adequacy of teacher training methodology. Once again, this is in contradistinction to the preferred state of affairs in recent years in English language teaching, where the need for an interactive, learning–by–doing methodology, in which "theoretical" and practical matters are integrated, has been given increasing emphasis. These are desirable attributes for teacher training methodology to adopt as well, principally for the same fundamental reason they have gained favour in English language teaching circles, viz.: the frequently superior ability of such techniques to facilitate learning (see e.g. Barnes, 1976). Equally, it is now widely understood that a method of training in *any* area, based mainly on theoretical lectures, is unlikely to lead, of itself, to practical ability in the subject: "I hear and I forget; I see and I remember; I do and I understand."

In practical terms, thus, a training course for university teachers of English can be based on a series of practical problems of the kind found in the normal teaching situation. This is the learning–by–doing element. The trainees try to solve the problems by working in small groups, sometimes on their own, sometimes with the tutor. The results of the small–group work are presented to and discussed with the other groups and the tutor. In this way, interaction is promoted. "Formal input" still plays an important role in such a scheme, but, rather than pre–programmed and monolithic, it is slotted in by the tutor when needed, usually in small "doses", and in the light of the trainees' actual framework of understanding. This technique also helps to integrate theoretical and practical aspects of the subject more adequately. The need for the theory arises out of the struggle to solve the problem: the trainee thus grasps its meaning and significance more readily. (See e.g. Taylor (1985) for further discussion of similar ideas.)

Such an approach to teacher training also has the advantage of being consonant with the type of methodology it is felt desirable (one hopes!) for the trainee to adopt in his/her own work.

Conclusion

In the foregoing, I have argued that, however under–researched the overall picture, one can be reasonably sure of what the main areas of knowledge and skill are that university teachers of English need. The requirements appear to be over-

whelmingly practical ones, centering squarely on the classroom, or in areas closely adjacent to it. Regrettably, this contrasts strongly with the content of many existing teacher training courses, and this calls for something of a re-think. But a change of heart in the content of such courses is not enough : like English language teaching itself, the methodology for imparting the content counts for as much, or more. Current teacher training methods are often less effective than they might be, and here also, therefore, reform is called for. In the end, it may be that we will know with ever increasing certainty, as more research is done, exactly what the needs of university English teachers are, but meanwhile, however, our ability to meet them adequately may not advance so rapidly. One only hopes that concerned teacher trainers will take action to ensure this is not the case !

Acknowledgement

Notes

[1] Prince of Songkla, CULI, KMIT, Mahidol and MaeJo. (*Note* : a similar survey was conducted for college-level institutions.)

[2] In descending order of priority, these are listed as :
- knowledge of how people learn
- knowledge of language (linguistics)
- language proficiency
- evaluation and testing
- materials adaptation, writing and course design
- administration, etc.
- teacher training
- research
- participation in workshops, etc.

[3] It is also worth noting that, in a recent, world-wide survey of TESOL educators and employers, "generally, questionnaire respondents indicated a need for more extensive training in TESOL methods and materials and in specific techniques for teaching language skills" (Hanrichsen, 1983 : 18).

[4] It is something of a paradox that the study of such an important aspect of teaching is so often seen as largely irrelevant. However, when one considers the markedly anti-educational way in which most courses on these topics are approached, such a reaction becomes more understandable (though not acceptable).

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