English Teacher Development: Top-down, Bottom-up or Both?

Thomas S.C. Farrell

INTRODUCTION

English teachers usually receive information from researchers and educators on how they should teach (in initial teacher education programmes) and how they should develop as teachers (during in-service courses). After teachers qualify as English teachers, they are urged to constantly upgrade their skills through some other course or workshop. However, this reminder to ‘upgrade’ is a top-down approach to teacher development, and consequently does not generate much enthusiasm from the teachers themselves.

The alternative is the bottom-up approach whereby individual teachers need to improve themselves through courses, workshops or by joining teacher development groups. This approach to English teacher development is usually more effective because individual teachers recognize a need to develop specific skills. On the contrary, the top-down approach to teacher development can be seen as an imposition on individual teachers by administrators who define the focus of the skills that they (the administrators) think need upgrading.

However, the thesis of this article is that both top-down and bottom-up approaches can sometimes interact to achieve maximum development. The article outlines a case study that highlights the use of both top-down and bottom-up approaches to English teacher development. The case study shows how an initial top-down approach to the development of English teachers in a programme aided in establishing a bottom-up developmental approach to a small number of individual English teachers within the same programme. Implications for specific bottom-up activities to English teacher development are outlined.

TEACHER DEVELOPMENT

Bell & Gilbert (1994) say that teacher development is teacher learning. They point out that “in learning the teachers are developing their beliefs and ideas, developing their classroom practice, and attending to their
feelings associated with changing” (p.311). They also suggest that teachers who undertake development courses are actually learning about how they learn themselves. Accordingly, Bell & Gilbert also argue that the purpose of teacher development is to empower teachers for on-going development, rather than being dependent on any facilitator or programme.

Further, Burder (1990) argues that in order to understand teacher development, it is important to understand the interaction of physical, psychological and social aspects of human development. In other words, teacher development is included in the broader context of adult development.

Feiman-Namser & Floden (1986) see three distinct approaches to the study of teacher development:

1. A model of changes in teachers’ concerns which involves attempts to construct theories of teacher development. Theory would guide training programmes with the use of a diagnostic-prescriptive approach to match the intervention with the teachers’ current concerns.

2. A model based on cognitive developmental theories in which existing cognitive-developmental theories are applied to teacher development. Teacher development is considered a form of adult development and effective teaching a function of higher stages of adult development, which are characterized by increased flexibility, differentiation of feelings, respect for individuality, tolerance for conflict and ambiguity, and a broader social perspective.

3. A style of in-service education emphasizing the teacher’s own definition of his/her needs. This involves descriptions of practices and efforts to justify them. Professional learning is seen as “mental growth spurred from within” (Feiman-Namser & Floden 1986: 523). Teachers are supported in their own direction of growth in the form of self-directed learning.

All three models, despite some individual differences, emphasize three similar aspects of teacher education. First, they acknowledge individual differences between pre-service and in-service teachers and the need for individualized training opportunities for the latter. Second, the focus is on changes of teachers over time, which therefore means that support must be maintained over time. Third, they recognize teachers’ present needs and interests in developing any teacher development programme.
From a practical point of view, a researcher once pointed out to me that there are three types of teachers who stay in English teaching. The first type gets bored and quits. The second type of teacher is bored but keeps doing the same activities in the classroom with no reflection or change (they may also have an illusion of job happiness). The third type of teacher realizes that he/she can become a genuine educator by reflecting on his/her actions, and may change what he/she does in the classroom based on the results of this reflection. The type three teacher believes and grows towards true inner peace. He/she is truly professional and does the best job possible, while understanding that he/she will never know it all (Gebhard 1996, personal communication). This article is directed at the third type of teacher.

**English Teacher Development**

Over 30 years ago, Rivers, in her book: *Foreign Language Teaching Skills* (1970), recognized that foreign language teachers had a responsibility to develop. She said: "Teachers must grow as they teach...remain in constant touch with new developments in the fields of his/her profession" (p.380). Rivers (1970) continued: "The successful foreign language teacher should set before him [sic] a dual aim: to keep abreast of the developments in his/her profession and to keep growing professionally as a teacher" (p.380).

Twenty years later, Lange (1990) defined English teacher development as a process of "continual, intellectual, experiential, and attitudinal growth" (p.250). In this article, 'teacher development' is defined as pedagogical growth in teachers who make their own informed decisions about teaching. However, the question still remains as to who should best support this pedagogical growth—the individual (bottom-up) or the institution (top-down)? The following case study highlights a context in which both top-down and bottom-up approaches to teacher development interacted to produce reflective teachers.

**Case study**

"Communicating with colleagues of a different culture" (Farrell 1998) is a case study about teacher development in Korea. This development was a result of changes in the job status of the author—he was appointed director of ESL programmes at a university in Korea. What follows is an outline of the case and the results. The case includes the context, the problem and a solution.
Context

- Small (5000 students) women's university in Seoul, Korea.
- 25 part-time native Korean English instructors in the programme.
- Syllabus and all examinations were designed exclusively by the director.
- Each freshman and sophomore student had to take English classes: conversation, video/audio classes for freshmen, and reading classes (prescribed text) for sophomores.

Problem

- I was the first foreign director of the programme, so the instructors did not know what to expect.
- Previous teacher meetings consisted of giving the instructors their syllabi.
- Needs analysis had never been conducted.
- The instructors had no meetings during the semester or year to discuss their classes, so what developed was that different groups of teachers (usually arranged by age) gathered informally and discussed their work at lunch or in the teachers' lounge.
- Instructors never participated in other group discussions.
- As a programme director, I tried to establish better collaboration by having more teacher meetings on topics; usually specific topics I thought important.
- Everybody came to these meetings, and at first I was pleased.
- However, it soon became apparent that I was doing all of the talking at the meetings, even when we broke up into group discussions.
- When I tried to institute peer observation, I was indirectly told, "This is not the Korean way", or "It will not work." And indeed it did not. The biggest obstacle I faced was that as a director in a Korean situation, I should have been authoritative. One day the teaching assistant told me that I was too democratic: "The Korean teachers do not know how to handle that."
- I was given no feedback in my first year as director from the teachers; instead they gave feedback to the previous director who in turn told me everything was great. I knew better.
Solution
To solve this problem, I tried a few different methods, some of which succeeded and others were only marginally successful.

I tried to meet the teachers 'by chance', outside my office to see who would be interested to talk about teaching and who might be interested in sharing their views about the programme.

1. **About teaching:** Teachers could bring lesson plans (their favourite ones) and put them in a drawer. Both old and new teachers could compare and use them. What really happened was I put in my lesson plans. Some other teachers did the same, but only a few of them and the cabinet was not filled up. But I did manage to tap into some of the informal discussions.

2. **About the programme:** I started an examination committee. This method seemed to work because the teachers had a vested interest in that their students were going to take these examinations. If Korean teachers have one overriding concern, it is for their students' success.

3. **Surprise:** From this examination committee, I found a group of teachers who were interested in the programme and their own teacher development. These five teachers met with me regularly to discuss their classroom situations in more detail. We audio-taped our classes and brought these tapes to our group meetings. We played the tapes and discussed our teaching. These meetings continued throughout the semester.

**Is this development bottom-up, top-down or both?**

It seems that in this case study there were features of both top-down and bottom-up approaches to the development of these English teachers. In a commentary on this particular case study, Professor Richard Day (University of Hawaii) had this to say (in Farrell 1998:28) about the top-down aspects of the case:

*I agree that top-down approaches generally have only superficial results and that meaningful, long-term changes involve initiatives by the participants. But it turns out that in this case both approaches seem to have worked. The exam committee was the result of top-down action: The program head, Farrell, set up the committee; it was on his initiative that it was established. He was also part of the committee.*
However, Day (1998) next pointed out that a bottom-up process came into play as a result of a top-down initiative. Day (in Farrell 1998:128) writes:

*The small discussion group was the result of a bottom-up process: some of the teachers, as a result of their contact with one another in their service on the examination committee, began talking with one another about their teaching.*

Through a process of trial and error, the programme head attempted to involve some 25 teachers in improving the programme. What seemed to work best was a voluntary approach that resulted in five of the teachers meeting regularly to improve their teaching. Consequently, it appears that teacher development will not be successful unless it has some bottom-up features. The bottom-up features in the case study involved individual teachers investigating their own teaching situations. They were trying to move beyond routine in their classrooms to a more reflective approach.

**Implications**

This article advocates the need for teachers of English to move beyond routine practice in their classrooms to a more professional approach to teaching: that of teacher as decision-maker. This involves both a top-down and bottom-up approach to teacher development. The top-down feature would be supported from institutions and administrators to allow individual (or groups) teachers to pursue their own investigations about their teaching situations. English teachers could develop by first looking at themselves as teachers and what they actually do in their classrooms (as opposed to what they think they are doing). This process of 'looking' can be achieved by an initial top-down 'push'; however, the only real development will be individual teachers reflecting on their classrooms (bottom-up). Consequently, English language teachers, who pursue a bottom-up approach to teacher development, would do well to remember the following:

1. Decisions made by teachers need to be based on informed choices (Richards & Lockhart 1994; Gebhard 1996; 1998). These informed choices give teachers a deeper awareness about teaching and learning, and they can thus make appropriate decisions about what will be effective in their classrooms.
2. Self-inquiry by teachers can result in a wealth of knowledge about teaching (Richards & Lockhart 1994; Fanselow 1987; Gebhard 1996; 1998). Teachers must collect information about their teaching individually or in collaboration with colleagues (as in the case study outlined in this article) so that teaching decisions can be more strategic. Would this type of development mean a bottom-up rather than a top-down approach? A top-down approach is concerned with an authority making decisions on what should be developed, while a bottom-up approach would mean individual teachers taking the initiative to develop their own teaching. However, as the case study outlined in this article showed, a top-down approach can interact with a bottom-up approach to English teacher development.

3. Much of what happens in the English language classroom is unknown to the teacher (Richards & Lockhart 1994; Fanselow 1987). A lesson is a dynamic event in which many things happen at the same time. Teachers cannot hope to be aware of everything that is happening in their classes. According to Good & Brophy (1991), this lack of knowledge about what is happening in the classroom may result in "unwise, self-defeating behavior" (p.1). However, Good & Brophy (1991:1) continue: "if teachers can become aware of what happens in the classroom and can monitor accurately both their own behavior and that of their students, they can function as decision makers." Teachers can thus try and control classroom events and not be controlled by them. First, though, the teacher must know what is going on in that classroom.

4. Experience is insufficient as a basis for development (Nunan 1992; Richards & Lockhart 1994). For example, 20 years of teaching experience can mean doing the same thing 20 times without any reflection. Consequently, teachers need to constantly reflect on their experiences and remain observant and not fall into the trap of blindly following routine.

CONCLUSION

English teacher development, as outlined in this article, involves individual teachers taking the initiative to explore their own teaching and classrooms. Ideally, English teachers should not wait to be told to attend in-service courses; instead, they should start reflecting on their classes before, during and after each class. Thus they can initiate their
own development (bottom-up). However, this type of development can and should be supported by teacher educators and administrators (top-down). This is important because some practicing teachers may find it difficult to pursue their own development alone because of time, money or fear. Furthermore, it is quite possible that interaction between top-down and bottom-up approaches to teacher development may likely produce reflective teachers, reflective administrators and reflective institutions. In fact, for real development to take place, it is important to see the relationship between reflection and development. I agree with Lange (1990) who says:

> The reflective process allows developing teachers' latitude to experiment within a framework of growing knowledge and experience. It gives them the opportunity to examine their relations with students, their values, their abilities, and their successes and failures in a realistic context. It begins the developing teacher's path toward becoming an 'expert teacher' (Lange 1990: 249–250).

Thomas S.C. Farrell is an Assistant Professor in the Division of English Language and Applied Linguistics at the National Institute of Education, Nanyang Technological University. His area of specialization is English teacher education and development. His research interests include teacher beliefs, reflective teaching and teaching methods.

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**REFERENCES**


