

Introducing New Knowledge and Skills to Second Language Teachers

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Teachers bring to inservice teacher education courses (INSET) their own beliefs, knowledge, and professional experiences. As these beliefs, knowledge, and experiences can exert powerful influence on what teachers learn (Kagan, 1992), it has been suggested that they should be valued and exploited in INSET programmes to enhance professional growth. Lamb (1995), for example, proposes that any INSET course that is concerned with long-term teacher change should take teachers' existing knowledge into account. Similarly, Wright (1992) observes that:

Too often teacher educators assume teachers to be in a state of pretheoretical or atheoretical ignorance before they embark on such [INSET] programs; yet participants have most likely built up theories over years of actual experience in the classroom. The role of teacher educators might better be to make these theories explicit during the course. (p.92)

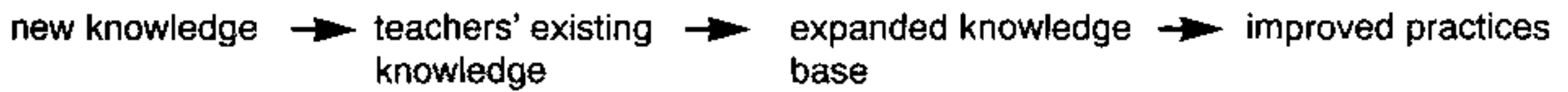
In this paper, I will describe how new knowledge and skills can be introduced to inservice English language teachers by building on what they know and do in the classroom. I will begin with a discussion of inservicing and teacher change. Then I will describe how teacher growth can be enhanced by taking into account teachers' professional experiences. This discussion will be illustrated by a lesson on introducing a task-based teaching methodology to teachers who follow a PPP (presentation, practice, production) paradigm.

Inservice Teacher Education and Teacher Change

A lot of inservice teacher education courses attempt to effect change in classroom practices by using a rational-empirical approach. This approach is based on the belief that people are "rational beings and that a change will be adopted once evidence has been produced to show that it will benefit those whom it affects" (Kennedy, 1987, p. 164). In other words, it is thought that explanation of new ideas and of the rationale for them is enough to bring about pedagogical change.

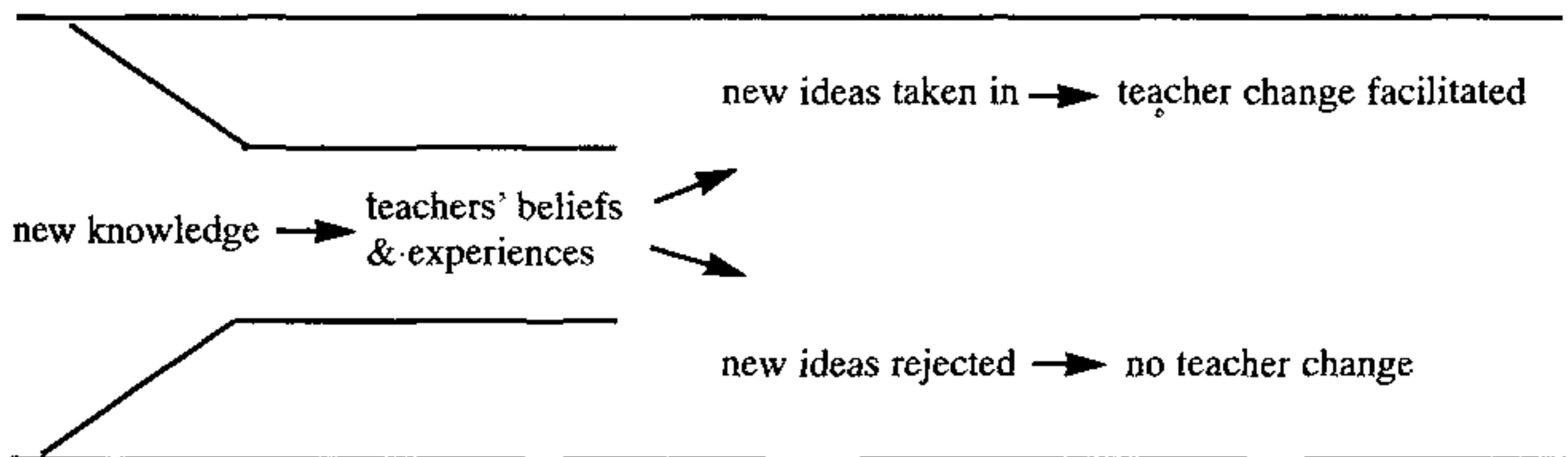
The rational-empirical approach is problematic because it assumes that once new ideas and theories have been introduced and explained, they will become part of the teachers' expanded knowledge base, which in turn guides classroom actions (Figure 1).

Figure 1
Assumption of Rational-empirical methods



It is now accepted, however, that teacher learning does not take place like this: teachers do not necessarily accept “expert wisdom” which they receive during INSET programmes, let alone translate it into practice. Instead, teachers' beliefs, knowledge, and prior professional experiences act as a filter through which new information is processed and interpreted (Clark & Peterson, 1986). If the new information is similar to what teachers believe and do in the classroom, assimilation of new concepts into the teachers' knowledge schemata is likely to take place. Where the received knowledge clashes with teachers' thinking and usual practices, new ideas may be rejected or only those bits that suit the teachers will be accepted (Figure 2).

Figure 2
Beliefs and experiences as information filter



Given the mediating effects of teachers' beliefs, knowledge, and professional experiences on teacher change, it is essential that they be taken as the point of departure in any teacher education activities. This will be illustrated below by a lesson that introduces task-based learning to PPP-type teachers. But first, an explanation of task-based learning and PPP is in order.

PPP and Task-based Learning

The PPP (presentation, practice, production) paradigm is one of the most widely used models of language teaching. In this model, the teacher begins by selecting a language item, contextualizing it, and presenting it to learners. Next, the teacher has the learners practise the language item in some controlled activities, e.g., drills and repetition. Finally, the teacher sets up opportunities for learners to produce the language they have learnt with minimal teacher intervention (see Gibbons, 1989).

Although PPP is widely used in second language teaching and is endorsed by a number of methodology texts (e.g., Gower and Walters, 1983; Harmer, 1991), it has come under attack in recent years. Lewis (1993), for example, states that the model “reflects neither the nature of language nor the nature of learning” (p.190). Scrivener (1994) suggests that the paradigm is based on a questionable, atomistic, sentence-level theory of language, while Willis (1994) notes that learners do not necessarily learn what teachers teach in PPP lessons. In short, it is felt that PPP is ineffective, rigid, and problematic (but see Harmer, 1996 for a positive evaluation of PPP).

To overcome these problems, various alternative paradigms have been proposed. One such example is Willis’ (1994) framework of task-based learning. Willis defines a task as “a goal-oriented activity in which learners use language to achieve a real outcome” (p. 18), and proposes that task-based learning should consist of six stages, as follows:

1. Introduction: Teacher introduces a task and brainstorms ideas with learners using pictures, short texts, etc.
2. Task: In pairs or groups, learners perform the task using whatever language they can muster. The emphasis is on fluency and communication.
3. Planning: Teacher prepares learners for the next stage when they report to the whole class how they did the task. Teacher helps with the necessary language items or structures.
4. Report: Learners report the outcome of the task to the whole class. There is a natural focus on accuracy as this is a public performance. Teacher comments and rephrases.
5. Input: Learners listen to a recording of fluent speakers doing the same task. Alternatively, they read a text based on the same topic.

6. Language analysis and practice: Learners engage in language analysis tasks. For example, they identify all the words ending in -s in a text and discuss what the -s means. If necessary, they also practise important language structures from the task in controlled activities.

According to Willis, this six-stage cycle of task-based learning satisfies four essential conditions for language learning. First, *exposure* to rich, comprehensible language is provided during the “task introduction” and “input” stages. Second, *opportunities for real use of the target language* are made available when learners perform the task in groups and report it publicly afterwards. Third, *motivation* to learn the language is created and sustained by the use of a communicative activity where there is a real outcome to achieve. Lastly, *the need to focus on language* (so as to prevent fossilization) is catered for when learners analyze samples of authentic language and practise specific language items in controlled activities.

In short, the task-based learning model attempts to replicate some key conditions optimal for second language learning. The methodology also subscribes to the principles of communicative language teaching, and allows learners to attend to both fluency and accuracy. These advantages, however, would not be enough to convince teachers to change their classroom practices if task-based learning was imposed on them as a top-down initiative. Teachers would find it hard to accept that what they have been doing all along is “wrong” and that they now need to adopt a different teaching model derived from pedagogical and psycholinguistic research. As Prabhu (1987, p.105) puts it, “The threat to existing routines can make many teachers reject innovation out of hand, as an act of self-protection.”

Using Existing Routines as a Starting Point

A useful strategy of introducing task-based learning is to build on what teachers already know and do. This can mean taking PPP, which is widely practised, as a starting point and trying to extend it. Specifically, this involves helping teachers to see that:

- the production stage is not an optional component. Often, teachers who have a tight teaching schedule leave out the production stage because of time constraints. Many of them also tend to think that production means more written work for learners, which in turn adds to teachers’ marking load. Teachers need practical measures for dealing with constraints of one kind or another.
- “task” is a useful learning unit. A teaching sequence can begin with a task. Alternatively, a task can come after some practice with the target structure. Teachers need to explore for themselves which option suits their learners best.

The above considerations guide the design of the following activity aimed at introducing task-based learning to inservice second language teachers. The activity is organized into four parts to reflect four broad training aims.

Activity

Part 1 Exploring Routine Practices

- In groups of 4-5, ask teachers to report how they taught “verb + -ing form” (e.g., *I like watching TV?* to a class of learners. Emphasize that the focus is on the teachers’ actual classroom experience. Teachers should not describe what they would do.

Part 2 Understanding PPP

- Give out the following teaching activity, which was designed by a practising teacher and has been tried out in the classroom.¹
- Ask teachers to discuss the similarities and differences between the activity and their own practices.
- Ask teachers to discuss the similarities and differences between the activity

TEACHING VERB + -ING FORM TO ELEMENTARY LEARNERS

1. Introduce the form “like + -ing” by asking students questions like *Do you like watching TV? Do you like reading?* Write the students’ answers on the blackboard. Underline the form.
2. Distribute the form below and explain the phrases on it: *love, like, don’t mind, don’t like, hate*. Make sure that students know the difference between them.
3. Pick out a picture cue card from a bag of pre-prepared cards on hobbies (e.g., swimming) and ask a student, *Do you like swimming?* S/he should answer by using one of the phrases on the form. Practise until everybody knows what the phrases mean.

- Ask teachers to discuss the similarities and differences between the activity and their own practices.
- Say that the steps outlined above can be divided into two teaching stages. Ask teachers to decide the pedagogical purposes of each of the stages, using this form.

| | Step | Teaching purpose |
|---------|----------------------|------------------|
| Stage 1 | Step ___ to step ___ | |
| Stage 2 | Step ___ to step ___ | |

- In a plenary, help teachers to realize that steps 1-2 form the presentation stage, while step 3 forms the practice stage.
- Ask teachers to discuss whether these two stages are enough to help learners to learn the target structure. (Teachers familiar with PPP are likely to say that an additional production stage is required, though they may feel that this will increase their marking load.)

Part 3 Introducing “Tasks”

- Ask teachers to discuss the advantages for learners to use target structures in a purposeful context; in other words, establish the need for a production stage.
- Conduct a brainstorming session on what kinds of activities can be used during the production stage. Help teachers to realize that “production” activities do not necessarily mean lengthy compositions which are time-consuming to mark. For example, if the language focus is on *-ed* adjectives, learners can be asked to write short diaries using any *-ed* words of their choice, e.g., *bored*, *excited*, and *depressed*. Learners can also draw faces to describe their feelings in the diaries (for some examples of works produced by second language learners, see Ng & Wu, 1996). If the language focus is on comparative and superlative adjectives, learners can work in small groups and write short sentences using words like *more colourful* and *highest (quality)* to sell a particular product. “Production” activities do need to be limited to written work. To practise using the simple past tense in

free activities, for example, learners can produce a few sentences in groups using the simple past to describe a famous historical figure. They then read out the sentences to the rest of the class for them to guess who the figure is. These activities do not involve a lot of extra work for the busy teacher. As they aim to get learners to use language to achieve some real outcomes, they can be called “tasks”.

- Have teachers design a “production” task for the teaching activity which they looked at earlier in Part 2.

Part 4 Exploring When to Use Task-Based Learning

- After teachers are familiar with the concept of “ask”, conduct a discussion with them on when it is appropriate to use the following models:
 - A. language input ➔ controlled practice ➔ task
 - B. task ➔ language input ➔ controlled practice ➔ similar task again
- In a plenary, establish that model A, which is based on PPP, would be useful for learners who do not have the language to engage in any communicative tasks without prior linguistic input. The model would also suit those whose aim is to pass a form-focused examination. In contrast, model B, which is essentially a task-based learning model, would work best for intermediate or advanced learners who want to use English for everyday communication. These learners do not necessarily need any language input before doing an activity, and it makes sense to begin a lesson with a task straight away and not with a presentation of structures. Any linguistic inadequacies revealed through the task performance can then be addressed by providing the necessary language input followed by practice with the target structure. Learners can then be given a similar task to see whether they can cope with the language demands now.
- Have teachers discuss how feasible it is for them to adopt a task-based methodology. Encourage them to share practical suggestions with one another on ways of dealing with such potential problems as the noise level generated by learners during active task-based work.

Rationale for the Activity

The activity outlined above introduces a task-based teaching methodology to inservice teachers by first getting them to talk about their own routine assumptions and

practices. While teachers may be using PPP regularly, they may not be aware of why they think this is a good model. Part 1 of the activity attempts to bring teachers' implicit conceptions of language learning to the forefront. The limitations of these conceptions can then be discussed. For example, even if there is time pressure to cover a crowded syllabus, this is no good reason to leave out the production stage.

The activity does not rely on a transmission mode of content delivery, which is commonly used in most teacher education programmes (see Bax, 1997). Instead, the activity encourages teachers to construct their own understanding of what an effective teaching methodology involves. Through the use of a specific teacher-designed teaching package, teachers explore what is pedagogically desirable and feasible, given the constraints they have to operate within. This helps teachers to see the relevance of the new ideas to their daily practical concerns.

The activity described above also values teachers' experience and existing knowledge. It does not seek to discredit PPP, as this model does have advantages (Harmer, 1996). But teachers should know that PPP is not the only model for language teaching. The alternative practices introduced build on what teachers know and do in class, and help to enrich teachers' repertoire of skills.

Conclusion

Learning new knowledge and skills is one of the important facets of teacher development (see Hargreaves & Fullan, 1992). It is therefore important to ensure that inservice programmes employ instructional approaches that are conducive to knowledge and skills acquisition. I have explained in this paper that such approaches should take teachers' routine practices and beliefs as the point of departure. The activity on introducing task-based learning to teachers who are used to the PPP model illustrates this inservice technique.

Note

¹This teaching activity is based on a package designed by Maria Ng, a practising English language teacher in Hong Kong. The package has been tried out with local secondary school learners, and now forms a part of the *TeleNex* Teaching Ideas database, which is an electronic bank of teaching resources for English language teaching. Teachers in Hong Kong, whether of the English language, or other subjects, can access the database at the following website address: <http://www.telenex.hku.hk>.

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