

EVALUATING IN-SERVICE TRAINING FOR PRIMARY ENGLISH TEACHERS IN TRA VINH PROVINCE, VIETNAM

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Abstract: This research is the primary investigation of the evaluation and expectations of the teachers and managers in the primary English teachers' training programs conducted by the (Provincial and District) Departments of Education and Training of Tra Vinh. The participants include primary English teachers and managers. A questionnaire, follow-up interviews and semi-structured interviews are used to explore teachers' evaluations and their applications. The findings show teachers' great supports for and interests in organizing more pedagogical workshops or conferences to share teaching experiences among primary teachers. Additionally, some of the suggestions for better success of the following workshops are mentioned.

Keywords: INSET, INSET impacts, professional development, teachers' evaluations, post-training supports

1. Problem statement

Tra Vinh is a remote province in the Mekong Delta, where the standards of living as well as socioeconomic levels are rather low in comparison to those of other regions in Vietnam. This unfavorable condition is likely to have some deleterious effects on the educational system in terms of the educational level and learning motivation of the population in general and on English teaching in primary education in particular. Therefore, to achieve learning and teaching quality as required by the National Foreign Language Project 2020 (NFLP 2020), various measures for in-service teachers' professional development have been taken by the Provincial Department of Education and Training (PDoET), including improving English proficiency level of the teachers to reach CEFR B2, training the teachers to exploit the new course-books effectively and appropriately, and holding many training workshops for professional development. Evaluating the efficacy of in-service training (INSET) contributes to the success of the on-going implementation of the national project by figuring out achievements and suggesting improvements in terms of preparation, implementation and application. The evaluations provide feedback information which helps the trainers, teachers, and educational administrators to organize and deliver more suitable and applicable INSET.

2. Literature review

INSET is the shortened form of In-service Training referring to the training given to employees during the course of employment (Collins English Dictionary). According to Ryan (1987), INSET refers to any type of activities related to the job (cited in Koç, 2015). In this sense, different kinds of training activities for in-service teachers from short courses, seminars, workshops to degree programs are regarded as a part of INSET. In this research, INSET is used to signify in-service training programs for primary English teachers carried out by the PDoET and the District Department of Education and Training (DDoET).

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INSET is a vital tool for transferring teaching innovation from policy to practice and providing chances for teachers to refresh their knowledge and share teaching experiences. Additionally, no teaching theory is suitable to all teaching contexts so pre-service teacher education cannot cater to all contextual diversity (McMorrow, 2007). Obtaining pedagogical knowledge and teaching expertise is a spiral process of constructing theory and practice. Therefore, INSET is a fundamental part of teachers' professional development and classroom practice. However, Burgess and Galloway (1993) argue that there is systematic and meaningful connection between INSET and teachers' classroom practice. They prove that classroom practice depends on external factors, such as the course-books, curriculum and examinations. The doubtful impact of INSET calls for research on supportive factors of an INSET program.

To Omar (2014), the four factors contributing to the success of INSET are *role of administrator, attitudes towards in-service training, needs analysis for in-service training and strategies of in-service training*. Because in-service training is rather a proactive than reactive process, its effectiveness relies on personalization and teachers' attitudes as well as the positive constructs from management. Needs analysis preceding the training is essential because it helps the trainers and managers to decide the right contents and suitable training methods. In-service training strategies provide the master plan ensuring the success of training with many professional and managerial factors like goals, objectives, activities, materials, and evaluation.

According to Aminudin (2012), successful professional development or INSET should take the roles of *content focus, active learning, collective participation, duration and coherence* into account. In another way, content and trainees' engagement are the two most decisive factors in the success of INSET programs. The content should be in accordance with teacher's goals, state standards, curriculum and assessments. The INSET should offer a chance for teachers learning from their own practice, renewing their knowledge and skills to prepare themselves for new changes.

The factors contributing to successful in-service programs mentioned in Lê Phạm Hoài Hương and Yeo are "*specific goals/ objectives, context-sensitive and cyclical training, appropriate content and methods, adequate materials and resources, the qualifications of trainers and the supports given to trainees*" (2016, p. 39). Lê Phạm Hoài Hương and Yeo (2016) value follow-up activities of INSET to support teachers with classroom practice. That is why they emphasize the collaborative and active engagement of educational administrators and trainers during INSET practice.

Uysal (2012) proposes the three steps of an INSET program: planning, execution and evaluation. Planning should be based on the structure of training in consideration of teachers' needs. Execution is related to many factors like methods, materials, contents, on-training feedbacks, and teachers' participation in the training. Evaluation includes follow-up monitoring and after-care supporting and theory-practice connecting. Both Uysal (2012) and Lê Phạm Hoài Hương and Yeo (2016) focus on post-training supports and impacts of INSET in teaching practice. Therefore, for simplicity and applicability, I support and apply Lê Phạm Hoài Hương and Yeo's six noticeable INSET factors: *content, training methods, trainers' expertise, materials/ supports for self-study, management* (2016) in this study.

Besides the recognition of INSET supportive factors, INSET impacts are varied in different contexts. In the report on Primary English Language Project in Sri Lanka, Hayes (2002) examined the experience of an in-service teacher training project using cascade models of teacher professional development. He pointed out some factors for the success of cascade training including allowing experiential, reflective and flexible training methods, spreading expertise to many teacher trainers, involving a cross-section of stakeholders in preparing training materials and decentralizing responsibilities within the cascade training structure. Lê Phạm Hoài Hương and Yeo (2016) found that the in-service training for primary English teachers in Central Vietnam, a part of NFLP 2020, was successful with appropriate training contents, materials, methods and management, but the lack of application and chance for participation and duplication of contents were the weaknesses. On the other hand, Hamid (2010) claimed that English teacher training at the primary level was a waste of materials and human resources. The study by Koç (2015) showed that teachers were not satisfied with their INSET programs because more than half of them did not fulfill their educational needs and the INSET activities were not encouraging. It is proven that INSET is essential to teachers' professional development but whether INSET meets teachers' needs and brings positive impacts to classroom practise should be reconsidered, especially in the context of Tra Vinh.

3. Research questions and research methodology

3.1. Research questions

This research is aimed to answer the following questions:

- *To what extent are primary English teachers satisfied with the INSET programs they have attended?*
- *To what extent do INSET programs impact teachers' classroom practice?*

3.2. Research methodology

The research follows the mixed-method approach with the use of qualitative and quantitative analysis. The first instrument is the questionnaire with 25 items and two open questions delivered to 50 primary English teachers in Tra Vinh province. The items ranked in a five-scale Likert questionnaire were divided into seven clusters (content, training methods, trainers' expertise, management, materials, implementation and overall evaluation). The two open questions were about the other possible evaluations to add more information on the teachers' perceptions and their expectations for the coming INSET programs. The follow-up interviews were used for the purpose of clarification, further information or any other evaluations from the teachers. Finally, semi-structured interviews with four administrators (one school manager, one head teacher and two specialists) were conducted to get their perceptions on teachers' implementation and their confirmation on teachers' reports.

The questionnaire (translated version) was piloted with 5 English teachers who were not involved in the research. Some items were revised to avoid overlap and misunderstanding. The final questionnaire was delivered with the support of English specialists of DDoET. Twenty-five questionnaires were delivered to primary English teachers in Tra Vinh city and the other 25 were delivered to the primary teachers in the districts of Tra Vinh province. All of the

25 items in the questionnaire were answered; however, the two open questions were fulfilled by 31 teachers and five of them gave their personal information for further contact.

The quantitative data collected were coded and analyzed using SPSS version 20 (Statistical Package for Social Sciences) for reliability, mean and standard derivation. A reliability analysis was applied with positive result (Cronbach’s alpha=.899) suggesting that those 25 items have good internal consistency on teacher training evaluation.

Finally, semi-structured interviews were all transcribed verbatim. All of the participants answering the questionnaire were optionally anonymous and pseudonyms are used in the interview report.

4. Findings and discussion

Data collected from the questionnaire, follow-up interviews, semi-structured interviews to the managers are reported to support the answers to the two research questions in relation to each other.

The questionnaire investigated the teachers’ training evaluation on seven aspects of INSET content (Items 1, 2, 3, 4), training methods (Items 5, 6, 7, 10), trainers’ expertise (Items 16, 17, 18, 19), materials/ supports for self-study (Items 8, 9, 11), management (Items 12, 13, 14, 15, 21, 25) implementation (Items 22, 23, 24) and overall (Item 20) scattered deliberately and the results are shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Teachers’ evaluation of INSET

No	Item	Clusters and items	N	Min	Max	Mean	Std. Deviation
Content						3.85	
1	1	The contents of training workshops were <i>updated and relevant</i> to my teaching.	50	3	5	4.00	.782
2	2	The contents of the training workshops were <i>necessary and helpful</i> to my current and future teaching.	50	3	5	4.12	.799
3	3	The contents of the training workshops were <i>practical and applicable</i> to my teaching.	50	3	5	3.64	.722
4	4	The training workshops covered all <i>theoretical aspects</i> of teaching young language learners (YLL).	50	2	5	3.64	.722
Training methods						3.76	
5	5	The training methods showed a <i>balance of theory and practice</i> in YLL teaching.	50	2	5	4.00	.808
6	6	The workshops offered many methods to <i>inspire</i> the teachers.	50	3	5	3.86	.495
7	7	The training workshops gave me chance of <i>making questions</i> .	50	3	5	3.80	.535
8	10	The training workshops brought many opportunities to exchange our <i>knowledge and teaching experience</i> .	50	2	5	3.36	.693
						4.07	

No	Item	Clusters and items	N	Min	Max	Mean	Std. Deviation
Trainers' expertise							
9	16	The trainers <i>clearly presented objectives</i> of each training session.	50	3	5	4.38	.567
10	17	The trainers made the contents <i>clearly transmitted</i> to the teachers.	50	3	5	4.06	.424
11	18	The trainers could reasonably and convincingly <i>answer the teachers' questions</i> .	50	3	5	3.98	.319
12	19	The trainers <i>inspired and motivated</i> the teachers.	50	3	5	3.86	.495
						3.71	
Materials / supports for self study							
13	8	The training materials were <i>well- prepared and sufficient</i> .	50	2	5	3.60	.700
14	11	Trainers <i>introduced reference materials</i> : soft copies, hard copies and websites...	50	3	5	3.78	.764
15	9	Trainers gave <i>clear instructions</i> on self-study and reference materials.	50	2	5	3.76	.797
						3.98	
Management							
16	12	The training workshop <i>schedules were convenient</i> to the teachers.	50	2	5	3.58	.950
17	13	I was awarded <i>certificates</i> for attending the training workshops.	50	2	5	3.92	1.047
18	14	I was asked for <i>evaluating the workshop delivery</i> right at the end of each workshop.	50	2	5	4.30	.931
19	15	The workshops were organized with the <i>logic of contents</i> : not overlapped, from easier to more complicated.	50	2	5	3.98	.820
20	21	The workshop contents and ojectives were <i>pre-informed</i> to the schools and teachers.	50	3	5	4.32	.621
21	25	I found the <i>financial support was sufficient</i> .	50	2	5	3.78	1.036
						3.97	
Implementation							
22	22	I could <i>apply successfully</i> what I was trained into my teaching.	50	3	5	3.92	.695
23	23	My school managers <i>encouraged and supported</i> me to implement what I were trained.	50	3	5	4.18	.825
24	24	I could <i>improve my teaching</i> and the students liked the class applied new teaching techniques. (classroom atmosphere, students' participation and performance)	50	3	5	3.82	.523
						3.86	
Overall							
25	20	Overall, I felt <i>satisfied</i> with the teacher training courses and I <i>need more</i> of them for my professional development.	50	3	5	3.86	.452

(Adapted from Lê Phạm Hoài Hương and Yeo, 2016)

Mean score of each item and average mean score of each cluster was around 4.0 (MaxM=4.38; MinM=3.36) indicating that most of the participants agreed with the statements in the questionnaire. The standard derivations of most of the items were below 1.00, which means the respondents' choice was dispersal. The following will present the findings qualitatively and quantitatively, in the order of satisfaction levels or in relation to each other.

4.1. Trainers' expertise

Among many factors, the teachers were most satisfied with the trainers, with the highest average mean for the four items being M=4.07. The data collected showed the teachers were most satisfied with the trainers' methods of presentation such as presenting the objectives of the training sessions and making the training contents understandable and useful and easy for the teachers to acquire. Besides, the trainers could answer teachers' questions in terms of theory and practice. This means that the trainers had a good command of pedagogical knowledge and teaching experience.

In the follow-up interview, in terms of trainers, Ms. Huong and Ms. Lam appreciated trainers' engagement, devotion and professionalism. Many of the teachers showed their preference for having foreign trainers (eg. Filipino trainer) over Vietnamese trainers and further explained that foreign trainers created genuine needs for real interaction in English. In fact, Ms. Huong reported: *"I got a great chance sharing experience with my Filipino trainer who had quite different experience from mine, teaching English as a second language"*. However, Ms. Lam was somewhat doubtful about foreign trainers' presentation since they were not engaged in the NFLP2020, not members of PDoET or DDoET, did not have authority and were not required to accept responsibility, especially in periodical observation. In sum, the teachers were most satisfied with the trainers' expertise: their knowledge and teaching experience as well as ways to foster the teachers' inspiration.

4.2. Training methods

While the teachers highly appreciated trainers' expertise, they were not very satisfied with the training methods, while most of items in these two factors looked fairly similar. In fact, the average mean score of training method was not high (M=3.76), second to the lowest. A report on the follow-up interview would help to explore the causes. Ms. Nhu explained that she was satisfied with the trainers' expertise but she was not very satisfied with the training method. She said: *"The trainer conveyed much of teaching practice and theory in his presentation but we had no time for practising what we have learned. We preferred more micro-teaching practice"*. In the same line, Ms. Lam supported the idea that the trainer could give satisfactory explanations but the teachers did not have much time either to discuss or to share with other teachers, both inside and outside the training workshop, because the duration of each workshop was so short. This finding was opposite to that of Lê Phạm Hoài Hương and Yeo (2016). In fact, while learning and sharing knowledge and experience among the teachers was the most satisfactory factor (M=4.02) in Central Vietnam, it got the lowest satisfaction level in Tra Vinh, deep in the South of Vietnam (M=3.36). In sum, the teachers were not satisfied with the organization and delivery of the training because they wished the training sessions could be longer to get more teachers' active participation and engagement in discussions and share from

one another.

4.3. Content

Similarly and relatedly to training methods, the teachers were not very satisfied with the training contents with the average mean of 3.85. The suitability and helpfulness of the contents got higher satisfaction with the mean scores of 4.00 and 4.12 respectively. However, practicality and applicability of the INSET content to their teaching practice was not highly evaluated (M=3.64) in comparison to other factors. The results were rather lower than that in the study by Lê Phạm Hoài Hương and Yeo, where the teachers were more satisfied with the practicality of the contents (M=3.98).

Speaking of practicality and applicability of the training content, the teachers showed much interest and concern. Two teachers, Ms. Lam and Mr. Nhut, thought that the training workshops helped greatly with their teaching expertise but some of the techniques were not applicable sometimes or some parts of the procedure were not suitable. Ms. Lam had some minor problems with the application because her classes were mixed ability, with minority pupils, and she further requested for more theoretical contents on teaching English as a foreign language (EFL), especially to young language learners (YLL) in training sessions. Mr. Nhut said: *“I have problems in applying the new techniques. For example, many pupils, the weak ones, could not take part in the activities”*. This was proven by the fact that the coverage of training content on aspects of teaching EFL to YLL did not get full agreement among the teachers (M=3.64). This confirmed the findings of an English specialist of PdoET: *“In 2014 and 2015, primary English teachers training focused on the how: how to teach the new course-books, how to use technology in teaching, how to motivate the learners; not yet focus on the why because we do not have enough time and we emphasis on the practicality first”*. It is shown from the quantitative analysis and follow-up interview that the teachers expected more relevant theoretical knowledge about YLL which could help them to solve their own teaching problems.

4.4. Implementation

In the self-report of implementation, most of the teachers were self-confident with applying what they have been trained (M=3.97). The implementation was evaluated in three aspects: manager's approval, applicability, and pupils' interests. Of the three factors, managers' approval gets highest satisfaction (M=4.18). Their interest and devotion to teachers' training and professional development will be further reported in the following session. Relating to the applicability and effectiveness on classroom atmosphere, the follow-up interviews with two teachers, Ms. Lam and Mr. Nhut, were conducted with the following results.

Ms. Lam said: *“In some of my classes, when I applied the trained techniques, only the strong pupils got engaged and I had to let them do the similar activity in my own way or traditional way not to let the weak ones behind. Sometimes, I had to adjust and combine the old and the new methods”*. When asked for further explanation, she described that her class was both fluency and accuracy focused. For example, some of the pupils had problems with oral forms; others had difficulties with written forms. That is why she kept constant attention on the two groups and balance between teaching oral and written forms.

While Ms. Lam was very flexible and confident, Mr. Nhut noticed the great discrepancy between what was trained and how to teach it. There was a variance between the ideal setting of the model teaching and his own teaching context. He was longing for another training workshop to ask whether and how he should adapt the training methods or not. He shared: “*The training was helpful but sometimes I got confused because we learnt different procedures to exploit the lesson and I am not sure what is better and what is supported by the authority*”. Ms. Lam and Mr. Nhut had different ways to deal with the problem of applying the acquired knowledge and they both expected to have “official” guidance from the “authority”.

4.5. Materials/supports for self-study

The teachers were positive about the materials provided in the workshop, with average mean score $M=3.71$. They agreed that the printed materials were not only adequate but also relevant to the training workshops. Ms. Lam reported: “*We were recommended with reference materials, electronic ones, and useful links that are helpful in our teaching. I could make use some of them in my teaching. I love activity books most*”. This finding on the importance of relevant materials was also confirmed by studies of Aminudin (2012), Uysal (2012), Lê Phạm Hoài Hương and Yeo (2016).

4.6. Management

Management was among the factors highly estimated by the teachers ($M=3.98$). This factor describes PDoET and DDoET specialists’ roles as organizers and managers. Some of the descriptions in this cluster are beyond their roles and responsibility. The criteria for management belong to three groups: training schedule and finance, evaluation and certification, pre-information and logic of contents.

The training schedule and finance are among the least satisfying factors with $M=3.58$ and $M=3.78$. From the view of PDoET and DDoET specialists, the schedule is arranged at the most convenient time (Friday and weekends) and financial support was fixed by the provincial or the NFLP 2020’s budget.

The idea of post-training evaluation was supported by the school managers. For example, Mr. Khang, the head teacher, confirmed that “*the evaluation mainly focused on the training workshop, not post-training or application*”. Hence, the impact of INSET in practice was not evaluated. Concurrently, Mr. Dang, a school principal, stated his school teachers faced some problems in application of INSET in terms of activity procedure in their lessons because there were gaps among INSET guidance, course-books and teaching practice. That was why he requested for “*friendly, regular and official*” observation and follow-up evaluation to support the teachers. The findings from the interview with Mr. Khang and Mr. Dang were similar to Uysal’s (2012) that school-based and follow-up observation was important but mostly lacking.

Certification is an important part of the workshop and the teachers really valued it. The quantitative report showed a high level of contentment on certification ($M=3.94$), but the teachers stated that for some of the workshops, they did not get any certificates and this situation should be improved in future training courses.

Unlike the report of Koç (2015), the teachers quite highly valued the role of PdoET and DdoET specialists as the program organizers who made sure the training sessions were not overlapped, and logically divided the training contents, from basic to complicated. The INSET program was a series of various interrelated training sessions. The main contents of each workshop and training objectives were pre-informed to the schools, which would prevent the teachers from engaging themselves in so many workshops with overlapping contents.

In terms of management, the specialists of PDoET and DDoET tried their best to fulfill their duties as professional managers. However, the teachers have some other suggestions to improve the coming workshops. Many teachers (17 teachers) claimed that the teachers were not be able to attend *all* the training workshops, which, as they wished, would have been delivered to all the teachers.

4.7. Overall

All things considered, in terms of what the INSETs brought to primary English teachers, the teachers valued the INSET with a fairly high satisfaction level ($M=3.86$) and clearly stated that they hoped to have more INSET programs that are long enough and more in-depth, and that provide more practice and more engagement for more teachers.

5. Conclusion

From the data analysis and findings, some conclusions can be drawn. The teachers were satisfied with INSET programs carried out by Tra Vinh PdoET and DDoET in 2014 and 2015. In general, the teachers appreciated the trainers' professionalism, workshop evaluation, certification and pre-workshop information. The teachers greatly valued the usefulness and effectiveness of the training contents and methods. Therefore, they looked for more chances to participate in more workshops, for the purpose of sharing experience and practicing teaching as well as more supported observations or follow-up evaluation in the INSET implementation. What the teachers have learned and done from INSET shows the positive impacts of INSET on their teaching practice and their pupils' learning. Obviously, the success of INSET in Tra Vinh during the period of 2014-2015 was generally confirmed.

Nevertheless, for better and more effective INSET programs, some suggestions should be taken into consideration. First, INSET should be long enough. Longer workshops mean more time the teachers will have for engagement and participation because in-service learning is at its best only if it is based on their prior knowledge and experience (Lê Phạm Hoài Hương and Yeo, 2016; Hayes, 2002). Second, the workshop should not come to an end when the teachers leave for home. It should include a follow-up stage to monitor, observe, and support the teachers as to how the INSET is actually applied by the teachers to their diverse teaching practice (Uysal, 2012; Koç, 2015; Lê Phạm Hoài Hương and Yeo, 2016). Third, to maintain teachers' contacts for sharing and learning from each other in the post-stage, PDoET or DDoET should form a kind of teachers' online forum (Koç, 2015). Fourth, through this kind of follow-up activities, the managers and trainers could learn how the teachers apply the INSET and could help them more effectively and the teachers could gain access to updated teaching resources and innovations.

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ĐÁNH GIÁ CHƯƠNG TRÌNH BỒI DƯỠNG GIÁO VIÊN TIẾNG ANH TIỂU HỌC Ở TRÀ VINH, VIỆT NAM

Tóm tắt: Đề tài này là một điều tra sơ bộ về sự đánh giá và kỳ vọng của các giáo viên và nhà quản lý các cấp đối với các chương trình tập huấn cho giáo viên Tiếng Anh bậc tiểu học được Sở Giáo dục Đào tạo (PDoET) và các Phòng Giáo dục Đào tạo (DDoET) tỉnh Trà Vinh tổ chức. Đối tượng tham gia đề tài này là 50 giáo viên tiểu học, cán bộ quản lý là các chuyên viên Sở và Phòng Giáo dục Đào tạo, hiệu trưởng và tổ trưởng chuyên môn ở các trường tiểu học ở Trà Vinh. Bảng câu hỏi, phỏng vấn sau khi trả lời bảng câu hỏi và phỏng vấn bán cấu trúc là ba công cụ bổ sung cho nhau để làm sáng tỏ hai vấn đề nghiên cứu là đánh giá chương trình tập huấn và thực trạng vận dụng của giáo viên trong giảng dạy tại cơ sở. Kết quả đề tài cho biết giáo viên rất quan tâm và mong muốn được tham gia nhiều tập huấn về phương pháp để chia sẻ kinh nghiệm giảng dạy với nhau. Bên cạnh đó, đề tài này cũng ghi nhận một số nguyện vọng, đề xuất của giáo viên để các đợt tập huấn sau thành công hơn.

Từ khóa: Bồi dưỡng giáo viên, hiệu quả bồi dưỡng giáo viên, phát triển chuyên môn nghiệp vụ, đánh giá của giáo viên, đào tạo giáo viên, INSET, tập huấn giáo viên, hỗ trợ sau tập huấn