

Focusing on epistemological beliefs in an ELT train-the-trainer program

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Epistemological beliefs – such as beliefs about the value attached to different forms of language teacher knowledge – play a key role in knowledge interpretation and reconstruction in language teacher education. This article first presents a case for an explicit focus on epistemological beliefs in an ELT train-the-trainer program for state sector primary and secondary teachers of English in the developing world who currently conduct, or will go on to conduct, in-service teacher education in their local context. The main part of the article provides suggestions for how this could be done, at the beginning, in the middle, and at the end of the program.

ELT train-the-trainer programs

There is increasing interest in the professional learning of teacher educators (Ping, Schellings & Beijgaard, 2018). This reflects a greater awareness of the teacher educator's key role in shaping teacher learning, and therefore more indirectly, in shaping the work teachers do with their learners. One specific point of interest is what is involved in becoming a teacher educator; that is, the specific knowledge, skills, and awareness required of a teacher educator and, in particular, the challenges of transitioning from being a teacher to being a teacher of teachers (Loughran, 2014).

In mainstream education, this transition is normally a long process of socialisation into a formal university context, without participation in a structured extended program to develop specific teacher educator knowledge, skills, and awareness (Loughran, 2014). In the field of English language teaching (ELT), the situation is different. ELT train-the-trainer programs have existed since the 1970s. The early programs were in the private language school sector, especially in the United Kingdom, or in the form of Western government-sponsored aid projects for state sector teachers from the developing world (Wright, 2009). Today a variety of ELT train-the-trainer programs are regularly offered by (1) ELT centres, especially in the United Kingdom, Australia, and New Zealand, with a language teacher education division, (2) 'short courses' at universities, again especially in the United Kingdom, Australia, and New Zealand, and

(3) government-sponsored language and language teacher education organisations such as the British Council internationally.

My focus in this article is on the pedagogy of ELT train-the-trainer programs for a specific – and common – group of participants: experienced state sector primary and secondary teachers of English in the developing world who currently deliver, or will go on to deliver, in-service teacher education (INSET) in their local context.

ELT train-the-trainer participants of this kind are often locally referred to as ‘teacher leaders’ or ‘master teachers’. They are likely to be the Head of the English Department in their school. As teacher educators, their role is – or will be – to design and conduct ELT INSET for teachers in their own school and probably other schools in their local area or larger region. This ELT INSET is typically designed to support teachers in a process of national curriculum reform and is normally in the form of short intensive programs, half-day or whole-day workshops and, where practical, some classroom observation.

The role of epistemological beliefs

In several of the case studies of ELT train-the-trainer programs presented in McGrath (1997) and Hayes (2004), there is recognition of the important role of the pedagogical beliefs of the participants and the program lecturers. These beliefs – about language teaching and learning, about language teacher learning, and about language teacher educator learning – are seen to strongly influence what and how participants learn on an ELT train-the-trainer program. This understanding draws on more substantive findings in (language) teacher cognition research that teachers’ beliefs about teaching and learning act as a filter through which teachers interpret and reconstruct information (Borg, 2006).

Despite the widespread acceptance of the crucial role of beliefs in ELT train-the-trainer programs, there is little explicit direction in the literature on how to work with them; that is, when and how beliefs might be co-constructed, elaborated, and open to review in the program. An exception is Brown (2004), who suggests the use of lesson transcripts, pre-session questionnaires, post-session review, and a methodology notebook.

Here I provide other suggestions but with a specific focus on epistemological beliefs. In broad terms, epistemological beliefs are beliefs about the nature of knowledge, the nature of knowing, and the relative value of different forms of knowledge (Hofer, 2002). In a language teacher education context, participants have beliefs, usually tacitly held, about what forms of language teacher knowledge should be valued and therefore given focus, and whether one form of language teacher knowledge has

greater value over another. Epistemological beliefs are understood as 'core' beliefs (Pajeres, 1992) and are therefore understood to shape – although not completely determine – knowledge interpretation and reconstruction in the language teacher education classroom.

This understanding of epistemological beliefs is especially relevant to ELT train-the-trainer programs that prepare language teacher educators to conduct ELT INSET. The ELT INSET classroom can often be a site of contested knowledge (Singh & Richards, 2009), with tensions between the introduction of theory and research-based knowledge, which is a key part of the ELT INSET teacher educator's role, and a common view among teachers that 'there are no generalisations about teaching – no ideas or theories of practice – that will be of any use to them in dealing with their own unique pedagogical problems' (Labaree, 2003, p. 20). Teachers' suspicions about the value of theory and research-based knowledge are likely to be more pronounced when this knowledge is generated in a foreign educational and cultural context, as is often the case. These epistemological tensions may partly explain why there is often limited uptake of new classroom practices presented in an ELT INSET program.

A number of current train-the-trainer programs preparing participants to conduct ELT INSET in their local context may well be based on an implicit understanding of the role of epistemological beliefs in knowledge interpretation and reconstruction; however, this understanding and how it informs train-the-trainer practices has not been addressed in the literature. My argument here is that an explicit focus on beliefs about the epistemology of INSET promotes language teacher educator learning. Such a focus can involve the co-construction, elaboration, and review of beliefs about (1) the value attached to different forms of language teacher knowledge that feature in the ELT INSET classroom, (2) how these forms of knowledge are most effectively introduced and placed in relation to each other, and (3) what justificatory demands should be placed on each. In the remainder of this article, I suggest how this focus could be enacted in train-the-trainer practices.

Contexts of ELT train-the-trainer programs

It is important to first establish common contexts of the train-the-trainer programs being discussed here. Most of the suggestions that are presented for working with epistemological beliefs are meant to be appropriate across the three contexts listed below; however, as noted in the suggestions, context can facilitate or constrain some training activities.

Context 1: For participants from the same educational institution.

Context 2: For participants from different educational institutions in one region or different regions of a particular country.

Context 3: For participants from different educational institutions in different countries.

Pre-COVID, program delivery for Contexts 1 and 2 could have been 'in-country' (for example, in Indonesia), or at the program provider's institution (for example, at a university language centre in Sydney); for Context 3, the program would have been delivered at the provider's institution. Today, however, online delivery is the norm.

An important variable across the three contexts is the relative mix of participants in a cohort with some ELT INSET experience and those without.

Focusing on epistemological beliefs

At the Beginning of the Program

It is essential to recognise that many ELT train-the-trainer participants may come to the program with little or no previous experience of reflective practice. They may fail to recognise the value of detailed and extended reflection on their pedagogical beliefs as a professional learning activity. It is therefore important for the facilitator to provide a clear and convincing case for reflective practice in general and for focusing on epistemological beliefs in particular. This could be done partly in theoretical terms; however, it is likely to be more effective if the facilitator presents concise and engaging narratives of their own professional learning experience in which the value of structured reflection on pedagogical beliefs and how epistemological beliefs come into play in the ELT INSET classroom are illustrated.

Reflective practice also generally needs to be modelled for those with little or no previous experience of it (Dragas, 2019; Farrell, 2019). In the case of using mediational tools for the co-construction, elaboration, and review of epistemological beliefs described below, the train-the-trainer facilitator needs to model how to work with these tools in a focused and systematic way and to provide language scaffolding for generalising from specific contexts.

The efficient and effective co-construction, elaboration, and review of epistemological beliefs in an ELT train-the-trainer program requires the establishment of a shared understanding of terms to make reference to relevant forms of language teacher knowledge that feature in the ELT INSET classroom. The importance of this type of negotiation of meaning is shown in the literature on dialogic modes of language teacher education (Johnson, 2009). It is especially important in intercultural contexts, in which the dialogue is likely to be in the participants' second language.

There is a variety of complex classifications of language teacher knowledge in the academic literature (Freeman, Webre & Epperson, 2019; Mann, 2005; Wright, 2010). For the purposes of dialogue on an ELT train-the-trainer program, the history

of these classifications and the fine-grained distinctions between knowledge and beliefs are generally not relevant, and it is important to avoid 'terminology overload'. The following is a serviceable classification of relevant forms of language teacher knowledge that feature in the ELT INSET classroom. It is one I have used successfully as a lecturer on ELT train-the-trainer programs.

External knowledge: The knowledge generated from research and theory development in the broad international professional language teaching community. In the language teacher knowledge literature, this form of knowledge is often referred to as *subject-matter content knowledge* (Schulman, 1987) or *disciplinary knowledge* (Richards, 2010).

Practical knowledge: Classroom procedures-focused knowledge generated by teachers themselves through the act of teaching. Golombek (2009) refers to this type of knowledge as *personal practical knowledge*.

Context knowledge: The knowledge teachers have of the physical, socio-cultural, and socio-political contexts in which they work, and how they act as resources for, and constraints on, teaching and learning. In the language teacher knowledge literature, this form of knowledge is often referred to as *situated knowledge* (Leinhardt, 1988; Tsui, 2003).

On an ELT train-the-trainer program, a shared understanding of a set of terms like these for relevant forms of language teacher knowledge can be achieved using different mediational tools. These tools include:

- a piece of published second language teacher education material;
- short, scripted statements from ELT INSET participants and lecturers; or
- a video-taped sequence from an ELT INSET class.

Each of these would need to include contextualised reference to theory, to teachers' classroom experiences, and to features of a particular teaching and learning context. For the viewing of the video-taped sequence, the study of the published material or the study of the scripted statements, the participants could be given a task such as 'What types of language teacher knowledge are in focus here?' This could be followed by dialogue to confirm, clarify, and expand on understandings, and to agree on a term to refer to each type of knowledge.

With a shared language established, it would then be possible to meaningfully and efficiently co-construct the participants' epistemological beliefs, allow them to be elaborated, and open them to review. This can be done using mediational tools that avoid an abstract philosophical discussion of epistemology by featuring short,

contextualised narratives of contested knowledge in the ELT INSET classroom. Such tools can be in the form of:

- hypothetical vignettes, requiring the participants to reflect how they would respond as a language teacher educator to a particular dilemma in the ELT INSET classroom. For example:

You have given a group of experienced teachers a chapter to read from a language teaching methodology book, published in the United States, on developing learner autonomy. The chapter describes ways language teachers can develop learner autonomy inside and outside the classroom. You are now discussing the chapter with the teachers. A common comment from the teachers is 'This won't work in my school'. How would you respond to this comment?

- narration of, and reflection on, real and personal critical incidents in the ELT INSET classroom, either as a language teacher educator or as an INSET participant, which involved some questioning of the value attached to a particular form of language teacher knowledge.

In Context 1 of the three contexts of ELT train-the-trainer programs outlined earlier, the vignettes could be institution-specific. The detailed recollection and coherent construction of, and useful reflection on, a critical incident requires time, so it is recommended that the participants be asked to do this in written note form in their own time before being required to share their narratives and reflections in class.

In small group discussion of the vignettes and the narration of, and the reflection and peer comment on, the critical incidents, the facilitator has an important management role. This is to (1) establish and maintain an epistemological focus rather than a classroom management one, (2) direct the participants to consider what their comments reveal about their epistemological beliefs, and (3) request that the participants provide evidence and justification for their stated beliefs. In the case of Context 1 of the three contexts of ELT train-the-trainer programs outlined earlier, the facilitator needs to be sensitive to the dynamics of hierarchy and seniority within the institution and consider the composition of pairs and groups carefully. In all three contexts, the facilitator needs to make their epistemological beliefs explicit to themselves and to the participants, and to subject them to the same requirements of evidence and justification.

The participants could be asked to write a summary of their beliefs about the epistemology of ELT INSET which have been co-constructed, elaborated, and reviewed through these activities. In the section *At the end of the program*, I describe how this summary could be used as a mediational tool to consider the confirmation of, or shifts in, beliefs as a result of participation in the train-the-trainer program.

In the middle of the program

The suggestions in this section relate to the stages of an ELT train-the-trainer program that deal with the methodology of ELT INSET, such as conducting sessions on the teaching of writing skills or the teaching of grammar. The main suggestion is to first consider the epistemology of ELT INSET practices in broad terms before reviewing specific methodological approaches and techniques. This additional stage is made possible – and most likely productive – because of the earlier establishment of a shared language to refer to different forms of language teacher knowledge and the earlier activities to make the participants’ and the lecturers’ epistemological beliefs explicit.

It would be useful to first consider options for ordering the focus (to use the terms previously suggested) on external knowledge, practical knowledge, and context knowledge. For example, if the ELT INSET lesson is about the teaching of writing skills, one option would be to start with the participants’ knowledge and experience as teachers of writing (practical knowledge), then introduce knowledge drawn from theory and research on writing skills and approaches to the teaching of them (external knowledge). This could then be followed by a discussion of issues related to the teaching and learning of writing skills in the participants’ educational context(s) (context knowledge).

The next step could be to have dialogue about how one form of language teacher knowledge should relate to another. For example, if a lesson on the teaching of writing skills follows the order of an initial focus on practical knowledge, then a focus on external knowledge and then context knowledge, there would need to be structured reflection on how the external knowledge confirms or challenges the INSET participants’ practical knowledge. There would also need to be structured reflection on whether the external knowledge needs to be adapted in the light of context knowledge.

The final step could then usefully focus on techniques, by considering options for bringing each of the three forms of language teacher knowledge into focus in the ELT INSET classroom. For instance, one of the options for bringing practical knowledge into focus is structured reflection on experience of ‘what works’ in the teaching of a particular language curriculum area, followed by a small group activity to share and compare that experience. An option for introducing external knowledge is through a review and elaboration of set readings, probably in a traditional lecture mode. Context knowledge could be introduced by asking each participant to provide a description of, and narratives about, the physical, social, and cultural settings of their school. In the case of Context 3 of the three contexts of ELT train-the-trainer programs outlined earlier, these descriptions would provide interesting and valuable intercultural

exchange. This dialogue may result in the possible re-evaluation of beliefs about the shared and unique characteristics of a particular teaching and learning context.

At the end of the program

The final stage of an ELT train-the-trainer program could include reflection on if, and how, the program has confirmed or reshaped the participants' beliefs about the epistemology of ELT INSET. The participants could use their written summary of their epistemological beliefs as a mediational tool. A small group discussion of which beliefs have been maintained, strengthened, questioned, or revised could be followed by a class discussion of how currently held beliefs could be enacted in ELT INSET classroom practices, with appropriate recognition of the curriculum area and context constraints.

CONCLUSION

My purpose in this article has been to develop the pedagogy of ELT train-the-trainer programs for experienced state sector primary and secondary teachers of English in the developing world, developing their knowledge, skills, and awareness to deliver effective INSET in their local context. I have made a number of practical suggestions for incorporating an explicit focus on beliefs about the epistemology of ELT INSET. These suggestions are based on two understandings. The first understanding is that epistemological issues are at the centre of the teaching and learning dynamic of ELT INSET. The second understanding is that language teacher educator learning is well-supported by the co-construction, elaboration, and review of epistemological beliefs.

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