

The use of the Research Lesson approach as a discussion platform for professional development with teachers of the deaf

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Research lesson

The research lesson, also known as lesson study, is an approach to teacher development that has its origins in Japan. In spite of often more constrictions than Western classrooms, Japanese teachers are able to achieve superior education levels in a range of aspects that include catering for individual differences, and higher order thinking skills. (Rohlen & LeTendre, 1995; Stigler & Hiebert, 1999). These higher levels of achievement appear to be a result of careful attention to classroom teaching and lesson planning. To improve these aspects, research lessons focus on the skills in classroom teaching and lesson planning about a particular and common topic, and teachers in small research lesson groups undergo a form of discussion and critical analysis by peers as to the best way to teach particular objects of each lesson.

Techniques such as problem solving and the experience of teachers are utilised, and the major objective is to develop a particular lesson and how it teaches its topic to the highest possible level of effectiveness (Lewis, 2000). This is achieved through focusing on the teaching of the critical elements, features or educational aspects of the particular lesson topic. This is done by observing the repeated cycle of a lesson, and each time, incorporating suggested improvements up to five times. An important component of the Research Lesson approach is the use of a Knowledgeable Other.

The Knowledgeable Other

According to Fernandez, (2001), a Knowledgeable Other may be an outside examiner, invited advisor, or reactor to lessons and their purpose is to provide a different perspective when reacting to the lesson study work of the group. They may provide information about subject matter content, new ideas, or reforms. They may share the work with other lesson study groups. Knowledgeable Others may act as motivators, encouraging teachers to persist in the research lesson process. They may do try-outs, volunteering to teach the research lesson first. Knowledgeable Others are often invited to speak as guest lecturers as part of the school staff's professional development. They are often in a position to get a holistic view of what factors are emerging in a particular cycle of lessons.

Background to the Study

The study that forms the background to this paper had two major objectives. One was to examine ways to improve the teaching of English as a second language (ESL) to deaf Cantonese-speaking students in Hong Kong. The other was to examine the use of the "Research Lesson Approach" as a form of professional development for teachers of the deaf.

The study represents a unique approach to research, in that the Research Lesson approach which traditionally is a form of professional development is also treated as a research instrument that can be used to examine ways of teaching English as a second language to deaf Cantonese speaking learners. Additionally by inquiring about the professional development

process during research lessons, an indication of the Research Lesson's ability to bring about professional development for teachers of the deaf can be obtained. It therefore represents new possibilities regarding research methodology, particularly the importance of utilization in research, i.e. How useful is the research to practitioners?

The study is qualitative and ethnographic in nature and this has led to the discovery of complex phenomena which must be viewed holistically, and according to Weisma and Jurs (2005), "The phenomenological approach emphasises that the meaning of reality is, in essence, in the 'eyes and minds of the beholders,' the way the individuals being studied perceive their experiences" (p243). It is therefore perceived as powerful by participants because of the natural setting and the accurate "measure" of reality. In the study the Research Lesson approach lends additional strength to reality in that teachers actually try to incorporate discussed items into their lessons.

Three major methods of data collection were used in this study, namely, videos, interviews, a small survey and participant observation. Videos were the major form of data gathering, and as well operated as the essential component to facilitate the reflective mechanism of the Research Lesson Approach. Interviews included formal and informal individual interviews as well as group interviews. Discussion around videoed lessons was particularly significant, as teachers had opportunities to comment on their own, and the observed actions of others with a view to making lessons more effective. The data was then analysed by modified analytic induction, and consisted of looking for words, phrases or events that stood out and then creating codes for these which were then formed into categories and sub-categories to organise the data.

The figure below shows examples of the types of codes and sub-codes that emerged from analysis of the data. While these are strong indicators of the way that the teaching of particular objects of lessons might be improved, they are much more than that. They are also major items to consider in terms of what might be important in terms of what teachers of the deaf should know in working with deaf students. Two examples which demonstrate this are the topic of signing, and authenticity of language. In the first case signing in terms of bilingualism raises the question as to whether, when signs are used in a second language, should the signs used for support be from their first language or from the second language? That is, in this case, when deaf Chinese students learn English as a second language and sign support is required should the students be given Hong Kong or English signs, and in what syntactical order given that both their "native" sign language and British Sign Language each have their own unique structure, which is different to both Cantonese and English verbal language. Such a matter is worthy of fully discussion. In the second example an emergent consideration was the need to use authentic language in language teaching and how this could be achieved when the driving force of language content is an English language text book from the regular school syllabus. There are of course answers to these questions, and in debating them, they have functioned as discussion platforms.

Discussion Items from Major Codes and Sub-codes

Philosophy of Language Teaching Usage Active learning Motivating Individual differences Signing Wholeness Authenticity Personalising Prior knowledge Natural approach Expectation Practice Checking comprehension Optimising hearing Consolidation Planning Spiral Consolidating Transitions Small steps Timing Modifying text Sequence Locating object(s) of lesson (Functions and Focus) Supportive	Methods of Teaching Conversation Co-teaching Using sentences Structured Using Chinese Body language Role playing Modeling Visual cues Cueing and fading Generalising Associating Highlighting Multi-sensory Contrasting Choral reading Individual Differences Long term planning Circulating Peer coaching Teachers' Feelings “Real” Professional Devel. Change Self improvement Rushed Observed Stress Pre-lesson planning Supportive Brainstorming Advanced ideas Relationships	Language Reading Structures Grammar Sounds Meta-language Incidental Pragmatics Management Concept Development Abstract Time sequence Multiple meanings Lesson Content Objectives Dictionary use Vocabulary Grammar Student Output Answering questions Expressive language (spoken, signed and written). Understanding
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Comment

The use of the Research Lesson approach is a potent form of In-service Teacher Education because:

1. It acknowledges the skill of experienced teachers to reflect and improve practice. In particular the teacher's reflections which act a form of continuous assessment.
2. It is direct and personal.
3. It makes clear connections between theory and practice including aspects such as philosophical issues.

4. It is able to draw out many aspects of teaching through discussion of items represented in the case of the study as codes and sub-codes.
5. Measurable improvements in teaching are obvious – e.g. Rapid increase in vocabulary and increase in usage.
6. It encourages collaboration through the sharing of good ideas and improved teaching techniques.
7. There is ownership of professional development by the teachers involved.
8. Difficulties in teaching are freely explored and “brainstormed” about.
9. Research Lessons develop a sense of trust between teachers and “the outsider”.
10. There is an increased awareness of the need for cohesion of teaching elements - For example the need for checking conceptual understanding ties into the need for a spiraling content which fulfills the need for maintenance, as well as further growth.

As has been discussed in this paper, perhaps the biggest effect of using the Research Lesson with teachers is the way in which it produced a discussion platform on teaching. In the case of this study, instead of addressing the single or small number of objects for a lesson, the process generated a very large number of aspects that experienced teachers felt were important for improving teaching. And as previously mentioned this is mainly a result of the complexity of the type of lessons, which are about teaching English as a second language to deaf Cantonese learners. The aspects raised by teachers represent genuine classroom considerations that offer a stimulating and engaging discussion platform for use in professional development. As such they represent a useful source of concepts, methods and teaching principles that might be included in programmes preparing teachers to work in deaf education in a range of settings, far more than simply enhancing the teaching of the “object or objects” of a lesson cycle.

References

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