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ABSTRACT

An in-service training program, developed for language center teachers in Finland, is discussed. The program was devised with the help of the University of Birmingham, England, and ran for three years with English as the language of instruction. The content of the program was based on the needs expressed by language center teachers and on the ideas of a Steering Committee and various experts. A study was carried out by members of the Steering Committee to look at the attitudes of participants concerning their training at the PILC. Subjects were consulted at three stages: before the seminar, during the second seminar, and at the end of the course. For comparative purposes, a questionnaire was mailed to 41 people who had completed one of the earlier PILC programs, and who were known still to be in the language center system. Respondents were asked for their subjective and retrospective views about PILC and its effects on their teaching and self development. The study concluded that PILC was an overwhelmingly positive experience for those who completed it. The strongest direct effect seemed to be on materials development. On the whole, participant expectations were met and the course was enjoyable and stimulating experience. (JL)

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This paper is about an in-service training programme which was developed for language centre teachers in Finland. A dull name, until we found the word PILC in it. In Finnish, this means fishing through a hole in the ice, and we thought of ourselves as fishing through holes in people's brains!

The programme (PILC) was devised with the help of the University of Birmingham, England, and ran for three years with English as the language of instruction, and with the support of the British Council.

A study was carried out on participants of the third programme. The objectives of the study were to find out how effective the course had been and what changes in approach and teaching methods it had provoked among the participants. We were able to conclude that PILC was a positive experience for those who did it, and that there were expected and unexpected outcomes.

Some background information about the programme follows before the study and its outcomes are described.

The language centre system in Finland was established in the 1970s as a result of a national degree reform programme which set new language proficiency requirements. The centres offer LSP services to university faculties and departments. The languages taught include Swedish or Finnish as the second official domestic language, English, the most popular foreign language, followed by German, French and Spanish, and other less widely spoken languages - Irish and Albanian being two examples.

The Language Centre for Finnish Universities (LCFU) is the national institute which serves the centres. Its main functions include research, materials development and in-service teacher training. LCFU sponsored the PILC programme and this research.

Language centre teachers include native speakers of Finnish, Swedish and the foreign languages taught. Before the mid-eighties, there was no systematic in-service language centre teacher training available in Finland. This was considered a gap worth filling. In 1985, a questionnaire was sent out from LCFU to all language centre teachers, over 350 people altogether. The objectives were to ascertain the levels of education and training of the teachers, the problems they encountered in their work and the kind of training they would consider appropriate. The typical language centre teacher was highly qualified in philology, but not necessarily in LSP teaching at university level. Many have expertise in their special fields.

The areas of materials development, teaching methods, testing, LSP teaching and sociolinguistics were perceived as being most important in terms of training.

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The results of this research were taken into account in the development of the PILC training programme. A Steering Committee was formed, consisting of the LCFU Director and five other members, three teachers and two researchers. The English Language Research Unit of the University of Birmingham was very much involved in the development and implementation of the programme.

The overall course objective was to achieve a general increase in the levels of job-related knowledge and motivation among the participants. More specific aims were to provide an up-to-date, in-depth training programme aimed at developing teaching expertise, familiarizing participants with recent trends in applied linguistics, raising their awareness of the theoretical rationale behind their teaching and awakening interest in longer-term self development. We also hoped to foster an integrated skills approach across languages.

We wanted to meet the needs of teachers who lacked formal training in applied linguistics and of those who were merely not up-to-date with the latest concepts.

We decided to organize a twelve-month training programme which would take the form of three one-week seminars interspersed with reading and assignments. This choice was influenced by our knowledge about the so-called sandwich MA in Applied English Linguistics being done at the English Language Research Department at the University of Birmingham. The PILC year began in September with an Orientation Day. The seminars were held in January, May and August. Specific reading lists and assignments were devised for each seminar.

The seminars were each run by two expert lecturers (with occasional guest lecturers), one from Birmingham and one from Finland or Sweden. For practical reasons, the working language had to be English, which did in effect limit the participants. The programme was meant for all teachers, but the vast majority were teachers of English, both Finns teaching mainly reading comprehension and English native speakers covering oral skills. The fourth and fifth programmes used Finnish and Swedish as working languages.

We on the Steering Committee were responsible for administration, course content, reading lists and evaluation. The seminar lecturers were expected to work together to produce the week's timetable and to coordinate input and group work. They were also responsible for setting the assignments and giving feedback.

The content of the programme was based on the needs expressed by language centre teachers and on the ideas of the Steering Committee and various experts who were consulted. Theoretical insights were backed up by practical application. In the first two programmes, existing teaching practice, materials production and testing were covered in the first seminar, theoretical and practical aspects of discourse analysis in the second, and alternative methodology and research practice in the third. The content of the first and third seminars was reversed for PILC III.

Participants were asked to fill in evaluation questionnaires from each seminar and from the course as a whole. The results of these evaluations were taken into account in the planning of future PILCs and of annual follow-up seminars.

The Research Project

It was clear from the evaluations and from PILCers' comments that the course was a success in that most people enjoyed it. Not satisfied with this, we, the planners, were anxious to find out how far the general and specific objectives had been met, and what effects PILC had had on the participants; had they changed or modified their professional practice? A study was carried out on those who completed the third programme in August, 1989.

Methods

The study was carried out by members of the Steering Committee. One of the researchers had completed the first programme as a participant and another was one of the seminar lecturers on the third programme. These roles and interests were known to the study subjects, and the possibility of bias cannot be ruled out.

The subjects of the study included native speakers of English, Swedish, Finnish and one bilingual Finnish/English speaker. Most taught English, but 2 taught Swedish and 2 German.

Participants were consulted at three stages - before the first seminar, during the second one and 12 months after the end of the course. A questionnaire was sent out in advance before the first seminar in January, 1989. PILCers were asked to return it (anonymously) on arrival at the seminar. The questions focussed on people's reasons for doing PILC, their expectations from it and their views about its applicability to their work.

At the next stage, face-to-face interviews were carried out during the second seminar in May, 1989. The aim of the interviews was to find out what effects PILC was having on the teachers - was it giving them new perspectives on their work and/or motivating them to do further study or research; was the content relevant; were there any practical effects.

At the third stage, in September, 1990, I carried out a structured interview, either face-to-face or over the telephone, with people who had successfully completed the course. The aim of this interview was to see if participants' perceptions of the effects of PILC had changed in retrospect in the areas discussed previously, and if they could point to any direct and concrete consequences. We were not so interested in whether they enjoyed the course, rather in the effect it had on them and on their teaching.

For comparative purposes, a questionnaire was posted in October, 1990 to 41 people who had completed one of the earlier PILC programmes and who were known still to be in the language centre system. Respondents were asked for their subjective and retrospective views about PILC and its effects on their teaching and self development.

Results

From the first questionnaire, it seemed that participants were doing PILC mainly to brush up their theoretical knowledge. Other reasons included professional development, getting some concrete ideas for teaching and learning about the latest research in applied linguistics. Discussion with colleagues was also singled out as an important aspect.

Expectations clearly reflected these reasons. They were also in line with our objectives.

The next question concerned usefulness. Linguistic theory, teaching methodology and foreign language learning theory were considered most useful.

The practical aspect most in need of development was materials preparation. Interestingly enough, most people felt confident in their classroom management abilities.

From the interviews carried out during the course, it was clear that many people were finding new perspectives on their work and having their intuitions confirmed. Some were being directly influenced and had changed some previous ideas and practices. Discourse analysis was perceived as the most interesting and useful topic so far. Some aspects of the alternative methodology seminar were seen as negative, although it was generally felt that everything was potentially useful, even if some things were more useful than others.

At this stage, most participants were too busy with the course to think in much detail about further development or research, although 75% expressed interest. Expectations were being met in terms of theoretical input and practical application, particularly with regard to discourse analysis.

Twelve months later, the people who were interviewed felt positive or very positive about their PILC experiences. Discourse analysis was overwhelmingly perceived as most useful in terms of content. This may have been influenced by the personality of one of the lecturers, who received "star" ratings. 75% of people had found their perspectives generally broadened, and new approaches to texts and text analysis, and to communicative methodology, were particularly mentioned.

PILC inspired changes in testing methodology in 20% of cases, but no drastic changes were reported by 50%. Forty per cent felt more confident as teachers and many were more self critical. A few even admitted to being more interested in their work. Seventy per cent of the interviewees had done something in the way of self development, 20% being enrolled on further education programmes.

These final interviews led us to believe that the positive impressions about the course expressed during it remained, or were even strengthened, during the intervening twelve months. All of the interviewees said they had found something of value for their teaching and had used ideas generated during the programme in their materials preparation.

Twenty-four of the 41 questionnaires sent to participants of PILCs I and II were returned. All except two of the respondents felt positive about PILC and had found it useful. The seminars in general were picked out as the most useful aspect. The atmosphere, contacts with colleagues and getting new ideas were also mentioned. Over 80% felt that PILC was still influencing their work, especially in materials preparation. Other direct effects included a more interested and self-critical approach and more awareness of theoretical aspects. Indirect effects included maintaining contacts and reading more widely.

Seven of the 24 respondents had gone on to enroll on the Birmingham sandwich MA programme, and another 7 had done or were doing MAs elsewhere. In all, 20 had been or were involved in some kind of further education or training, and 11 of these felt directly influenced in their decision by PILC. Many people were involved in materials development and/or research projects, about 60% of whom felt influenced in their decision by PILC.

So, we were able to conclude that PILC was an overwhelmingly positive experience for those who completed it. The strongest direct effect, which was common to all programmes, seemed to be on materials preparation. Teachers have more confidence to develop their own materials. They have new insights, for example about the application of discourse analysis and the concept of authenticity. Many have been motivated to further study and research, are reading more widely in the field and are attending more seminars and conferences. On the whole, participant expectations were met and the course was an enjoyable and stimulating experience. New contacts were made, intuitions confirmed, new knowledge applied and wider interests awakened.

These may be considered predictable outcomes, which largely corresponded with the original course objectives. There were more unexpected results. The extent of interest in and influence of discourse analysis on materials preparation was not foreseen, although it should be remembered that this was new to most people. The issue of follow-up seminars arose during the first programme, and they were instituted as a result of participant feedback. The full extent of the attraction of the Birmingham MA was something else that the Steering Committee at least did not anticipate.

Not all effects can be measured, and many interesting issues were raised. How can lecturer input be evaluated, or even controlled, in a course such as this? How does it affect participant attitudes and behaviour? Is there any way of controlling for the multitude of variables, in participants, lecturers, groups, organizers, commitment, involvement, even the weather? Do these have major effects on course outcomes?

One linguistic effect of the programme should be mentioned. "What are you doing next week?" "Oh, I'm pilcing." "Have a pilcing good time". I hope you have enjoyed this brief look at the Finnish PILCgrims' Progress.

Ref: Nordlund J, In-Service Training: A Twelve-Month Programme for Language Centre Teachers in Finland. LCFU, Jyväskylä, 1991