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# Having a lasting 'EfECT' on teacher educator professional development

By Ian Clifford, Simon Borg and Khaing Phyu Htut



This article sets out key action points that can be used to inform the design and delivery of teacher and teacher educator professional development projects. They are based on learning from the English for Education College Trainers (EfECT) project in Myanmar, and draw upon a peer-reviewed academic paper and evaluation reports.

The EfECT project in Myanmar provides several key action points that can be used to inform both general teacher education projects as well as projects that have a specific focus on developing teacher educators' English language skills. Here, we present these key action points, provide an overview of the EfECT context, and explore the key areas of learning in more detail, drawing on direct project experiences.

## Overview of key action points

For general teacher education projects

- Ensure training is **embedded in the workplace and pedagogical context**.
- Ensure **provision is practical** and focused on specific instructional strategies.
- Provide sufficient opportunities for **educators to master instructional strategies** through planning, practice and reflection in real classroom situations.
- **Provide targeted support for educators to reflect on their own practice**, especially when this is not part of the pedagogical or wider culture.
- **Build on the local pedagogical culture**, rather than attempting to change this entirely.
- Help educators understand the **link between activities and the purpose and objectives of lessons**.
- Support the sustainability of projects by **ensuring they work at the systemic level** and gaining buy-in from policymakers and education institution managers.
- Recognise that professional learning may, at least initially, be accompanied by **a reduction in professional confidence**.
- Include a range of **qualitative and quantitative measures** to monitor and evaluate project impact.
- **Include the political landscape in the project risk analysis**, and ensure contingency for disruption.

For projects with a specific English language focus

- **Do not assume English proficiency will improve** through English-medium instruction.
- Provide ongoing **opportunities for educators to use their newly gained English skills** to ensure retention.

## What was EfECT?

EfECT was a teacher education project delivered by the British Council and Voluntary Service Overseas (VSO) in Myanmar for an initial period between May 2014 and 2016, before gaining a subsequent 'bridge' extension to May 2017. The £4.5 million project was co-funded by the then UK Department for International Development (DFID) and the British Council.

- **Origins** – EfECT emerged from a state visit to the UK by then Myanmar president Thein Sein, who requested support for the country's education reform process through the placement of English language teacher trainers in teacher training colleges.
- **Goals** – the project set out to improve the English proficiency and teaching competence of Myanmar's initial teacher educators, many of whom had limited or no experience of teaching in schools.
- **Participants** – EfECT directly involved 2,000 teacher educators (across a range of subjects) from 17 teacher education colleges and two universities of education in Myanmar. Of these, more than 1,600 participants (85 per cent of whom were female) participated consistently and were included in the dataset analysed for an academic paper in 2018.

- **Content** – during its first year, EfECT focused on improving teacher educators' English proficiency using commercial English Language Teaching textbooks. In its second year, the focus shifted to improving general pedagogical skills, using a *Foundations in Teaching* course developed specifically for the project.
- **Structure** – sessions in each college were delivered by two international trainers – one from the British Council and one from VSO. During the first year, teacher educators received eight hours a week of English classes; in the second year, six hours a week were devoted to teaching methodology, and two hours a week were given to English language classes.
- **Extension** – the 'bridge' was a one-year extension that aimed to address key learning from the first phase, such as providing additional time for planning, teaching practice and reflection.

To build on the good work of EfECT, DFID (subsequently the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office) launched the TREE project in 2019. As part of this project, a study was conducted to examine the legacy of EfECT two years on (Borg, 2019).

## Embedding professional development in teacher and teacher educator practice

Ensure it takes place within teacher educators' **workplace**



### Model

effective pedagogy to the teacher educators



Provide immediate opportunities to **use** new pedagogical approaches



Encourage **reflection** on their teaching



Focus training on specific **instructional strategies**



## Embed professional development in teacher and teacher educator practice

Several elements of the EfECT model helped to support the pedagogical impact of the project.

- Support took place within the teacher educators' workplace; the project trainers were based at and delivered training in colleges.
- Trainers modelled effective pedagogy to the teacher educators, who then had immediate opportunities to utilise this in their classrooms.
- Pedagogical training had a practical orientation, focusing on specific instructional strategies that were context-appropriate.
- Teacher educators were encouraged to reflect on their teaching.

Even so, the EfECT model offered limited opportunities for teacher educators to gain mastery of the instructional strategies being taught. This was directly addressed in the one-year extension, where teacher educators were given more opportunities to plan with their trainers, practice new techniques in class with their students and reflect on that experience.

## Build in opportunities for educators to use their English skills

It is often assumed that English-medium teaching and training will, in and of itself, lead to improvements in the English proficiency of teachers and learners. EfECT, however, showed that many of the substantial improvements in English proficiency took place in the first year of the project, which was devoted to English classes. Little further improvement occurred during the second year, even though this involved many hours of pedagogical training through the medium of English.

In addition, when the teacher educators were revisited two years after the project, they reported that, while they were still using many of the pedagogical techniques they had learned through EfECT, they felt that their level of English, particularly in speaking and listening, had declined through lack of use. These perceptions were confirmed through lesson observations and English proficiency testing of a sample of former EfECT participants, with many showing a decline in English proficiency of one whole CEFR<sup>1</sup> level.

## Support educators to reflect on their own practice

Reflective practice – where teachers explicitly review the effectiveness of strategies they are using and consider their practice in terms of strengths and areas for improvement – was a key criterion used to measure changes in teaching competence (alongside planning, questioning, interactive teaching, use of resources and assessment). While 68 per cent of EfECT participants showed improvements in reflective practice, this was among the lowest of all six criteria, with 80 to 90 per cent showing improvement in the other areas.

This indicates that teachers require highly structured support to develop their reflective practice. This support, however, should also acknowledge the local context. In Myanmar, the challenges associated with promoting reflection were compounded, as Htut, Lall & Howson (2022) point out, by the fact that the military coup on 1 February 2021 saw the re-emergence of a military-dominated education system, in which unthinking obedience, rather than critical reflection, is valued. This may have caused many EfECT participants to doubt the longer-term sustainability of attempts to promote critical thinking. So, another clear message from the project is that efforts to promote reflection among teachers and teacher educators should account for the cultural, historical and political context in which they take place.

## Build on the existing pedagogical culture

EfECT took place at a time when the promotion of 'child-centred' and 'learner-centred' education was very much in vogue in Myanmar and similar developing contexts. In terms of implementation, however, various 'stories of failure grand and small' (Schweisfurth, 2011, p.425) had been reported in the literature. EfECT was designed to ensure that pedagogical reform built on teacher educators' existing repertoires, rather than seeking to wholly replace these. For example, the project sought to improve the effectiveness of whole-class teaching through the integration of interactive strategies and more effective direct instruction, rather than promoting approaches that would have required a greater shift in teacher educators' thinking. Learning about the value of question-and-answer routines, open-ended questions, 'thinking time', 'think-pair-share' effective follow-up questions and setting learning outcomes also helped them improve the effectiveness of whole-class teaching.

<sup>1</sup> The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) is the Council of Europe's international guideline to describe language ability, comprising six levels, ranging from A1 to C2.



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### **Identify the pedagogical skills that require further development**

While there was strong evidence that teacher educators were still using interactive pedagogical activities two years after the project, some areas of practice remained less developed, including sustaining trainee teachers' engagement and building on trainee contributions. And while teacher educators continued to use a range of new activities in their classes, these were often disconnected and not part of a coherent lesson plan. Teacher educators, thus, require additional support to think more purposefully about how to use activities effectively.

### **Work with education managers to ensure systemic change**

While EfECT led to changes in teacher educators' classroom practice that were sustained for some time after the project, it did not work directly with college principals and those responsible for education policy, which meant less success in setting up more sustainable structures to support teacher educators' professional development into the future.

The one-year extension aimed to set up such structures by creating mechanisms for experienced teacher educators to mentor new or less-experienced teacher educators and promoting portfolios as a professional development strategy. Two years later, however, there was no evidence of mentoring or professional development portfolios being used, which again emphasises the need for such practices to be embedded in systemic changes, and the need for engagement and buy-in from education managers and policymakers.

### **Recognise that improvements in professional confidence and teaching competence increase and decrease over time**

While professional confidence was originally set as a key performance indicator for EfECT, the project subsequently found that self-assessed confidence was very high at baseline, but then declined for at least some participants, perhaps as teacher educators started to realise what they did not know. This raises the possibility that changes in teacher and teacher educator confidence may be 'J-shaped' or 'U-shaped' – dropping as participants become more aware of gaps in their knowledge before, subsequently, starting to rise. Lower confidence, then, should not necessarily be assumed to be a negative outcome in professional development projects.

### **Use both qualitative and quantitative sources to assess the impact of professional development**

EfECT generated a huge amount of quantitative data, including English proficiency CEFR levels using Aptis<sup>2</sup> testing, moderated lesson observation data, scores from knowledge tests and measures of self-rated confidence. However, the qualitative data gathered was more limited – mainly participant stories using the 'Most Significant Change' methodology. A key recommendation from the project is that it can be useful to elicit more qualitative data, to provide more fine-grained, contextualised narrative accounts of participants' experiences.

## Make contingencies for significant political changes

The ensuing disruption from Covid-19 and the military coup d'état on 1 February 2021 in Myanmar, as documented by Htut, Lall & Lawson (2022), demonstrate the vulnerability of projects to significant political changes. While these challenges did not directly disrupt EfECT, the subsequent TREE project was, in fact, closed prematurely, and this is a reminder that the political landscape should always be part of project risk analysis, and that contingency options (such as moving to online delivery) are in place.

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