

A Vocational Training Course for Chinese Volunteers at Faculty of International Studies, Prince of Songkla University, Phuket Campus

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Abstract

In March 2010, the Faculty of International Studies, Prince of Songkla University, in cooperation with the Confucius Institute at Phuket, provided a vocational training course to six Chinese volunteers. The course aimed to provide the Chinese volunteers with knowledge of Thai language and culture and foreign language teaching methodology. The training lasted for 10 months: March to December 2010, and the assessment was done through an achievement test and teaching practice evaluation. At the completion of the course, the trainees reached the training objectives with high scores from the achievement test (an average of 86%) and with high performance from the teaching practicum (an average of 85%). Closed- and open-ended questionnaires were employed to investigate the effectiveness of the training. Results from the close-ended questionnaire showed that the training was of high quality since the contents met the trainees' educational and professional needs and it was an adequate integration of theory-based and practical-based training. Similarly, the instructors and mentor teachers satisfactorily completed their tasks as the instructors taught step-by-step, gave constructive feedback, and used effective teaching methods and the mentor teachers supervised the trainees closely, provided prompt assistance, and helped improve the trainees' teaching performance. Moreover, findings from the open-ended questionnaire revealed that the training course fostered the trainees' teaching confidence, knowledge, and methodologies. A recommendation made for the training was that it should be that Thai language courses should be more interrelated with the teaching methodology courses.

Keywords: vocational training, training course, Chinese volunteers

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โครงการอบรมพิเศษสำหรับอาสาสมัครจีน ณ คณะวิเทศศึกษา มหาวิทยาลัยสงขลานครินทร์ วิทยาเขตภูเก็ต

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บทคัดย่อ

คณะวิเทศศึกษา มหาวิทยาลัยสงขลานครินทร์ วิทยาเขตภูเก็ต ร่วมกับสถาบันขงจื้อ ภูเก็ต จัดอบรมพิเศษให้กับอาสาสมัครชาวจีนจำนวน 6 คน ในเดือนมีนาคม พ.ศ. 2553 การอบรมดังกล่าวมุ่งให้ความรู้เกี่ยวกับภาษาและวัฒนธรรมไทยและวิธีการสอนภาษาต่างประเทศ มีระยะเวลา 10 เดือน ระหว่างเดือนมีนาคม - เดือนธันวาคม พ.ศ. 2553 โดยประเมินผลสัมฤทธิ์ของการฝึกอบรมจากข้อสอบวัดระดับความรู้และประเมินจากการฝึกปฏิบัติการสอน ภายหลังสิ้นสุดการฝึกอบรม พบว่าอาสาสมัครชาวจีนสอบผ่านข้อสอบวัดระดับความรู้ในเกณฑ์เฉลี่ยร้อยละ 86 และ มีผลประเมินจากการฝึกสอนในเกณฑ์เฉลี่ยร้อยละ 85 นอกจากนี้ได้มีการประเมินผลประสิทธิภาพของการฝึกอบรมจากแบบสอบถามปลายปิดและปลายเปิด ข้อมูลจากแบบสอบถามปลายปิดแสดงให้เห็นว่าการฝึกอบรมมีประสิทธิภาพสูง เนื่องจากเนื้อหาวิชาสอดคล้องกับความจำเป็นด้านการศึกษาและประกอบวิชาชีพของผู้เรียน และมีการบูรณาการระหว่างทฤษฎีและการฝึกปฏิบัติอย่างเหมาะสม การสอนและการให้คำปรึกษามีคุณภาพสูง เนื่องจากการสอนกระทำอย่างเป็นระบบ ผู้สอนให้คำแนะนำที่เป็นประโยชน์ และใช้วิธีการสอนที่มีประสิทธิภาพ อาจารย์พี่เลี้ยงให้คำปรึกษาและความช่วยเหลืออย่างใกล้ชิด รวมทั้งช่วยให้อาสาสมัครได้พัฒนาการสอนของตนเอง ข้อมูลจากแบบสอบถามปลายเปิดระบุว่า การฝึกอบรมช่วยเพิ่มความมั่นใจในการสอนความรู้และเทคนิคการสอนให้แก่อาสาสมัคร ข้อเสนอแนะสำหรับการฝึกอบรมนี้คือควรให้มีความเกี่ยวข้องเชื่อมโยงระหว่างรายวิชาภาษาไทยและรายวิชาด้านการสอนมากกว่านี้

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Introduction

Since the economic reforms in 1979, China's economy has grown rapidly. From 1979–2009, China's GDP grew an average of 9.6% (National Bureau of Statistics, 2009). This huge economic development has contributed to the P.R. China's significant role in the global economy and society. A larger number of people recognize the advantages of being able to communicate in Chinese; it will open up their opportunities to conduct business with Chinese enterprises or in China. As a consequence of the major impact of China's economy, Chinese language has been widely used as a means of communication at an international level. With awareness of this fact, the Chinese Ministry of Education has actively supported Chinese teaching and learning worldwide by founding the Confucius Institutes, which are non-profit public institutions, in overseas countries. The primary mission of these institutes is to educate foreign learners about Chinese language and to export Chinese culture globally. By the end of year 2010, 322 Confucius Institutes have been established in 96 countries (Hanban, 2011). In order to fulfill its mission, the Confucius Institute Headquarters has initiated the Volunteer Chinese Teachers Program with the main purpose of supplying the Confucius Institutes located in each host country with Chinese volunteer teachers.

However, most of the Chinese volunteers are young graduates who do not have sufficient exposure to cultural differences; therefore, living and working abroad can be a challenge, especially if they fail to adapt to a new environment. In her article, Jing (2010) mentioned the Chinese volunteers' behavioral and psychological problems which resulted in their failure to complete their task and their unexpected journey back home a short time later on. Furthermore, a lack of cross-cultural language teaching experience makes it difficult for the Chinese volunteers to teach in a classroom where teachers and students are from different social and cultural backgrounds (Yang, 2008). In contrast to their local students, these volunteer teachers hold different cultural values; hence they face the difficulty of teaching and understanding the local students' learning behavior.

Not only must they deal with cultural awareness, but language teachers are also required to master content knowledge pertaining to both subject matter and pedagogy (Shulman, cited in Wang, 2010). As a matter of fact, not all of the Chinese volunteers hold a degree in Chinese language teaching or have been extensively trained on how to teach Chinese as a foreign language. Thus, they cannot avoid teaching challenges and consequently their teaching quality can be compromised. The Office of Chinese Language Council International or Hanban tries to alleviate this

complication by conducting some specific training courses, yet the problem persists as those courses are considered too short, superficial, and involve merely theory (Jing, 2010).

The aforementioned problems indicate that Chinese volunteers need to obtain both pedagogical and cross-cultural knowledge. A training course should enlighten them about insights into the host country's culture as well as foreign language teaching methodology. Moreover, such a course must not be perfunctory or theory-based solely. Taking all of these into accounts, Hanban decided to have a full-time teacher training course conducted in a target country where Chinese volunteers are going to work in. In 2010, a group of Chinese volunteers came to Thailand to embark on training courses run by several well-known universities throughout the country: Chiang Mai University, Naresuan University, Khon Kaen University, Chulalongkorn University, and Prince of Songkla University, Phuket Campus.

A training course at the Faculty of International Studies

The Faculty of International Studies (FIS), Prince of Songkla University, Phuket Campus, has had a nationwide reputation for Chinese teaching as the Chinese Studies programs has been established for more than 10 years. On 24th December 2006, the Confucius Institute at Phuket was founded making Prince of Songkla University the only university in Thailand affiliated with two Confucius Institutes (the other one is located in Had Yai). With the solid background of foreign language teaching and understanding of teaching challenges faced by many Chinese volunteers, the Confucius Institute asked for the cooperation from FIS to provide a 10-month-vocational training course for six Chinese volunteers. The training course started in March and ended in December 2010. Its aim was to facilitate the volunteers to acquire knowledge and understanding of Thai language and culture as well as to enhance their foreign language teaching techniques.

The training course was divided into three major categories: Thai language courses, cultural courses, and teaching methodology courses. Thai language courses were Basic Thai Communication, Thai and Chinese Linguistic Comparisons, and Fundamental Thai I. Cultural courses included Orientation to Thai Culture, Thai Ways of Life, Introduction to Thai History, and Intercultural Communication. Teaching methodology courses were designed considering particular aspects of teaching. Lectures on foreign language teaching theories and methodologies were followed with classroom observations and discussions, teaching demonstrations, teaching practicum, and teaching seminar respectively. In addition, field-work to different parts of Thailand was included.

Training procedure

The training began in March 2010. Six Chinese volunteers, aged 22–25, were first required to undertake a Basic Thai Communication course for 60 hours. Then they took other courses in Thai history, culture, traditions, and ways of life for 15 hours each. During this period, they were given the chance to take a local field trip to Phuket Town and its surrounding areas. By so doing, they could learn culture from both inside and outside of the classroom. Following this, the volunteers took a more advanced course of Fundamental Thai I. This course was divided into particular skills of listening and speaking and reading and writing. The volunteers were expected to be able to communicate in Thai effectively, both in everyday life and simple academic contexts, at the completion of the 240-hour-course.

In addition, since only two volunteers had educational background in language teaching, it is necessary for them to be trained in teaching methodologies. The training was designed based on Schön's reflective model (1983). According to the reflective model, a teacher training program should incorporate two types of professional knowledge which are 'received knowledge' and 'reflective knowledge.' While the former focuses on particular concepts and knowledge a language teacher should be familiar with, the latter, which Wallace (2001) calls 'experiential knowledge' (p. 13), deals with how to instill reflective practice into a language teacher. The professional knowledge the volunteers studied included various teaching and learning issues such as trends in foreign language teaching, teaching techniques, lesson planning, material designs, and testing and evaluation. This was to provide them with necessary teaching skills which would be needed for their future teaching experience. Next, the volunteers observed different classes taught at Faculty of International Studies and filled up the observation form which they would use for a class discussion session following by each classroom observation. After that, the volunteers performed the teaching demonstrations in which they had to adapt all knowledge and skills learned to prepare their lessons and classroom teaching. The teaching demonstrations were done for a total of four times. This was because the volunteers needed to teach all the skills: listening, speaking, reading, and writing. In addition, they were also asked to teach one content-based course. Prior to each demonstration, the volunteers had to submit their lesson plans to all the supervising teachers who had taught them in the teaching methodology course. During their demonstrations, they were observed by the supervising lecturers who acted as a student and a mentor giving constructive feedback at the end of the demonstration. A teaching seminar session was run right after each

demonstration. In this session, the volunteers reflected on their teaching practice as well as learned from the lecturers' and their classmates' comments. Throughout all these processes, the trainees stepped forwards to how to become a reflective practitioner. In other words, they were stimulated to think back on their teaching experience with a careful examination and consideration in order to come up with their individual resolutions for their own teaching dilemmas.

After the completion of the teaching demonstrations and seminars, the volunteers were paired up with cooperative teachers who would work as their supervisors during the 8-week-teaching practicum. They were teaching different courses ranging from language courses to content-based courses. The similar steps as the volunteers did during their teaching demonstrations were repeated. Specifically, they were required to submit their lesson plans to their supervisors, be observed by the supervisors, and reflected on their teaching performance as well as learned from their mentors' feedback and suggestions. Throughout all these experiences, it was highly expected that the volunteers would be well-prepared for their future teaching positions as volunteers and would also be better aware of Thai learner's learning styles and behaviors. With this knowledge and awareness, it is likely that they will become competent prospective teachers.

Outcomes of the training

In order to complete the training, the Chinese volunteers were required to pass a minimum of 70% from achievement tests and from their teaching practice evaluation. At the end of the training course, all the volunteers successfully completed the course with an average of 86% from the total test score. They were also able to fulfill their 8-week-teaching practice with satisfaction by meeting the minimum requirement of 70% from the teaching practice evaluation. In fact, all of the trainees received at least 85% from the teaching practicum assessment. Details of the scores are as follows:

Table 1 Achievement test scores

Participant	Basic Thai Communication (100%)	Fundamental Thai I (Listening & Speaking) (100%)	Fundamental Thai I (Reading & Writing) (100%)	Total (100%)
A	85.38	88	70	81.12
B	85.91	89	72	82.30

C	83.41	89	75	82.47
D	97.25	96	89	94.08
E	93.29	88	85	88.76
F	95.01	95	83	91

Table 2 Teaching practice score

Participant	Score (100%)
A	85
B	85
C	88
D	88
E	85
F	85

Training evaluation

The effectiveness of the training course was assessed using the close-ended and open-ended questionnaires. The close-ended questionnaire consisted of three major parts: overall quality of training, teaching quality of the instructors, and overall quality of the mentors. The participants were asked to respond to several statements by selecting the level of agreement using the following choices: 5 = strongly agree; 4 = agree; 3 = neutral; 2 = disagree; and 1 = strongly disagree.

The open-ended questionnaire required the Chinese volunteers to identify strengths and/or weaknesses of the training as well as to suggest improvement and additional training they considered helpful.

Findings from the close-ended questionnaire revealed that most of the volunteers strongly agreed that the teaching facilities were appropriate. They also concurred that the training was well-prepared and met their professional and educational needs; the courses were well-structured with the appropriate and useful content; the course objectives were defined and achieved; the teaching materials were of good quality; and the training was an adequate integration of learning from theory and practice. In terms of overall quality of the teaching and supervising, findings from the questionnaire illustrated the volunteers' obvious satisfaction. Regarding the teaching quality of

instructors of Thai language courses, the majority of the volunteers strongly agreed that the teaching was done step-by-step as well as explanations were given clearly, the instructors provided useful feedback and suggestions and evaluated learning appropriately. All the volunteers equally strongly agreed that the instructors were knowledgeable and punctual, used effective teaching methods and were opened to queries. Most of the volunteers also agreed that the instructors had good preparation. As for the teaching quality of the instructors of the teaching methodology courses, the results were also consistent with those mentioned above.

With regard to the cooperative teachers' guidance, all of the mentor teachers were proved to complete their jobs very well. This was because all the volunteers strongly agreed that their cooperative teachers were knowledgeable, provided clear information, supervised them closely and adequately, observed their teaching regularly and gave them prompt assistance when needed, helped identify their teaching strengths/weaknesses and improved their teaching performance.

The final part of the close-ended questionnaire dealt with knowledge application. Results from the questionnaire presented the volunteers' stronger teaching confidence. They reflected that they gained more teaching knowledge and skills by learning more effective teaching methodologies, and believed that they could apply knowledge gained to their future teaching practice.

In the open-ended questionnaire, the volunteers were asked to pinpoint the training strengths and/or weaknesses as well as to suggest any improvement and additional training required. Overall, the trainees considered a variety of the training contents the most significant strength. They mentioned that the course was very systematic and well-organized since it included all necessary matters such as Thai language, culture, traditions, fieldwork, teaching methodologies, teaching demonstrations, and teaching practicum. On the other hand, the volunteers came up with some weaknesses of the training such as late announcement of the training schedule and a few inconsistencies of Fundamental Thai I due to the fact that there were four instructors teaching each skill.

Regarding how the training could be improved, the volunteers suggested several things such as fewer instructors for Fundamental Thai I, more connections between content of Thai and teaching methodology courses, more communication between each instructor which would bring about teaching consistency, and Thai student partners who might help them better develop their Thai ability.

Additional training the volunteers required was a focus on Thai culture, history and geography, and teaching methodologies particularly those fit well with Thai students.

Conclusion

It can be seen from the test results and teaching practice evaluation that all the volunteers successfully completed the training. In addition, all of them received positive comments from the instructors. They were defined as diligent, enthusiastic, and greatly responsible learners and student teachers. These qualities tremendously contributed to their success. More importantly, they showed significant improvement in both Thai language and teaching ability.

Moreover, the results of the close-ended questionnaire, which aimed to measure the training satisfaction and knowledge application, clearly showed that all the volunteers were satisfied with the training which provided them various learning opportunities. They appreciated that they could study Thai language and culture in a classroom and experience what they had learned in a real life situation during their fieldwork to several parts of Thailand. They also valued the great chances to applying knowledge about teaching methodologies into their teaching demonstrations and actual teaching practices which lasted for 2 months. This was supported by the findings from the open-ended questionnaire revealing that all the volunteers believed that they gained more teaching knowledge and skills, developed more effective teaching methods and techniques, and were confident that they would be able to apply such knowledge and skills into their future teaching profession.

The Office of Chinese Language Council International or Hanban attempts to minimize the conflicts related to collision of cultures and Chinese volunteers' teaching quality. Since training courses run by the Confucius Institute Headquarters solely were not sufficient, a vocational training course conducted by a trustworthy institute in a host country was implemented. Based on the outcomes emerged and reported previously, such a training course promisingly prepares the Chinese volunteers to become competent teachers who are able to teach as well as have cross-cultural understanding. This will not only help them to assimilate into a different socio-cultural environment, but to arm them with comprehensive knowledge of foreign language teaching.

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