



Primary School Teachers' Uptake of Professional Readings: Understanding the Factors Affecting Teachers' Learning

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MARGARET KITCHEN
The University of Auckland

SUSAN GRAY
The University of Auckland

MAREE JEURISSEN
The University of Auckland

ABSTRACT

Professional reading is a core source of input in teacher professional development. This article describes 47 primary school teachers' reports of their professional reading both in their schools and during the first year of a university TESOL (Teaching English to Speakers of Other languages) in-service qualification. One third of these teachers are bilingual. Both motivation and engagement are explored and vignettes of two bilingual teachers illustrate these factors. The findings show the frequency of participation in professional learning through professional readings is beneficial but low, however teacher professional reading attitudes are dynamic, the variables being relevancy and agency.

INTRODUCTION

Sustaining teacher learning through professional reading is key to the Ministry of Education's strategy to improve student achievement (Ministry of Education, 1999). Teachers' professional knowledge base relies on the input of new research information, and so it is surprising to find that professional reading, nationally and internationally, is given little explicit attention in teacher professional development literature. As lecturers on a TESOL in-service qualification for practising primary and secondary teachers, we (three lecturers) are naturally interested in professional reading as a core source of input in helping the teachers think about the role of language in teaching and learning. Course readings theorise the weekly lecture topics and some provide practical strategies that embed the theory. In 2014 we embarked on a two-year longitudinal study to explore teachers' use of professional readings. This article describes 47 primary school teachers' reports of their professional reading in two contexts: a) their school contexts when they began the TESOL course of study and b) during the first year of the TESOL course. Case studies of two teachers are included. We anticipated that the findings would enable us to refine the TESOL course

content and to effectively structure a classroom approach to reading tasks to meet teacher need. In carrying out this study we followed Allwright's (2003) model of exploratory practice seeking to enhance the quality of life in the classroom by understanding more deeply the factors affecting the teachers' learning.

CONTEXT: PROFESSIONAL READING ON THE TESOL COURSE

The TESOL in-service course we teach on draws on the *New Zealand Curriculum* guidelines stating that all teachers are to bring an explicit language focus to their teaching (Ministry of Education, 2007). Being a TESOL course the focus is on current language acquisition theories including notions of power and opportunities for participation (Cummins, 2010; Gibbons, 2002; Kanu, 2006; Leki, 2001; Norton & Toohey, 2001); language from a functional perspective (Derewianka, 1998; Humphrey, Droga & Feez, 2012); task-based learning (Ellis, 2003); theories of how teachers can bring about change in their contexts of work (Engeström, 1994); curriculum planning (Nation & Macalister, 2010); and sustaining teacher development through the notion of teachers as scholars (Allwright, 2003; Kumaravadivelu, 2006).

THE ROLE OF PROFESSIONAL READINGS IN TEACHER LEARNING

Teacher professional development literature refers in passing to the role of professional reading in bringing about teacher change (for example: Borko & Putnam, 1996; Darling-Hammond, 1998; King & Newman, 2001; and Poskitt 2005). However, professional readings in themselves are given very little attention. A noticeable exception is Kwakman's (2003) Netherlands study. Pushing for large-scale educational reform, teachers have been retrained for their new roles as facilitators in students' learning processes and as creators of stimulating learning environments. In analysing data Kwakman draws on both cognitive psychological and professional development theories to stress the situated nature of knowledge and learning. Learning in the workplace is conceptualised as participation in professional learning activities categorised as reading, experimenting, and reflecting as well as collaborative activities. While not addressing effective ways of using readings, Kwakman contends that reading is a core responsibility since teachers' professional knowledge base relies on the input of new research information for continuous improvement. Kwakman's findings provide four significant pointers for this study. Firstly, that teacher learning requires close ties to teachers' concrete tasks and daily activities. Secondly, that the frequency of participation in professional learning through talking or discussion, often around professional readings, is beneficial but disappointingly low. Thirdly, that, in reality, school contexts may lack the infrastructure to be conducive to teacher learning, leading Kwakman to recommend that future research explores outside-school, classroom-centred collaborative activities for teacher learning. And fourthly, Kwakman contends that personal factors are more significant in predicting time spent on professional learning than task and work environment factors.

That teacher learning requires close ties to the classroom is a recurring point in literature (Leithwood, Harris, & Strauss, 2010; Poskitt, 2005; Putnam & Borko, 2000 for example). The notion resonates both with the Ministry of Education's *Teaching as Inquiry* cycle where "teachers inquire into the impact of

their teaching on their students" (2007, p. 35), and with the *Spiral of Inquiry* (Timperley, Kaser & Halpert, 2104). Putnam and Borko (2000) point out that this current awareness of learning as situated, social and distributed has its roots in the late 19th century in the thinking of Vygotsky and Dewey. More recently Allwright (2003) and Kumaravadivelu (2006) have developed the situated nature of teacher learning in championing teachers as developers of their own theories of teaching and learning in their unique classroom contexts through close classroom monitoring, particularly of students' dialogic interaction. Allwright's exploratory practice framework encourages teachers to explore classroom puzzles. Furthermore, Kitchen, Gray & Jeurissen (in press) suggest another factor is critical in multicultural classrooms: building TESOL knowledge.

In recommending situating teacher learning in multiple learning settings, both in and out of classrooms, Putnam and Borko (2000) support Kwakman's propositions that location is a factor in teacher learning, and that challenging insights come from working collaboratively. Embedded in social constructivist theory is the recognition that learners construct their own meaning and that learning most powerfully occurs in a social context with the assistance of others (Hargreaves, 1994; King & Newman, 2001; Kinnucan-Welsch & Jenlink, 2001). Professional learning communities can support risk taking and the struggle that is required to transform practice (Putnam & Borko, 2000). When professional learning communities have members from different discourse communities, the learning may be greater. Generally, teachers from diverse backgrounds and school cultures are more likely to stimulate new, challenging and transformative insights than discourse groups that are school-based with shared cultures and discourse communities (Putnam & Borko, 2000).

Kwakman's clearest findings are that personal factors are more significant in predicting time spent on professional learning than task and work environment factors. It is in exploring these personal factors, in particular the dynamically evolving relationships between teachers as learners and their contexts, that the metaphor of an ecosystem characterised by interconnectivity is elucidatory. Ecosystems are nested (Bronfenbrenner, 1989) and depending on agency in particular contexts, teachers react to or initiate action. Learners and their contexts are inseparable and dynamic because "each responds and adapts to the other" (Ushioda, 2015, p. 47).

In summary, teacher professional reading may be widely used in teacher professional development but there is a paucity of studies addressing effective ways of using readings. Two points are clearly addressed in a range of literature: close ties to teachers' daily classroom activities are required and associated discourse is critical and may be more challenging and thus stimulating with teachers from diverse backgrounds and school cultures. The metaphor of an ecosystem characterised by interconnectivity provides a lens for examining the mutable nature of teachers' engagement with professional readings.

METHODS

This study arises from a two-year longitudinal case study. This article reports on both quantitative and qualitative data from the early stages of the study: a) quantitative data from a Likert-scale questionnaire administered when the teachers began the TESOL course (see sample statements in Appendix 1); b) attached to the questionnaire, six topics on which the teachers were invited

to write a very short qualitative paragraph (*My professional reading before the TESSOL course, Professional reading in my school, Professional reading as a source of ideas, How my current professional reading links with my classroom practice, Sharing professional reading with my colleagues, and How accessible I find professional reading*); and c) two qualitative interviews, one at the middle of the first year of the TESOL course and one at the end of the first year. The questionnaires were administered to all the students (70) in the first of four core papers as part of the normal teaching TESOL programme to raise students' awareness of the place of professional reading and to help us (their lecturers) understand their current attitudes towards, and practice of, professional reading. Using random sampling, nine students were then invited to participate in four interviews over the course of the study. This article uses questionnaire data from the 47 primary school teachers who volunteered to participate in the study, and interview data gathered from two primary school teacher participants (Mei and Tui, pseudonyms) during the first year of the project. These two participants are reported on here because they represent the increasingly bilingual, bicultural and migrant nature of the primary school teaching workforce.

The data from the completed Likert-scale questionnaires were analysed quantitatively using the questionnaire statements. For the questionnaire's open-ended questions, descriptive key-word analysis was used, generating categories from topics. An example of a category is: *Professional reading at my school*. With the interview data, categories were inductively generated from the statements made by the participants. For example, *Readings become a part of your DNA*.

Our inability to easily generalise patterns particularly in the qualitative data led us to consider ecological perspectives. We found the teachers as learners required a dynamic conceptualisation. Their agency within their hierarchy of contexts was critical. The teachers and their varied contexts were "inseparable pieces" (Dörnyei, MacIntyre, & Henry, 2015, p. 423) of an ecological whole.

FINDINGS: QUESTIONNAIRE AND OPEN-ENDED QUESTIONS

This section reports on findings from the quantitative data first. The categories generated were: *Participation in school-based professional readings; Diversity of responses: The critical roles of relevance and agency; and the New Zealand focus of school-based professional reading*. Teacher responses to the open-ended questions attached to the Likert-scale questionnaire are used to elaborate on the questionnaire categories. The two interview vignettes with bilingual teachers (Mei and Tui) that follow illustrate the factors affecting their uptake of professional readings.

Participation in school-based professional readings

There is an expectation that teachers engage in professional reading to keep up to date with subject knowledge and also to become familiar with current research findings in pedagogy (Ministry of Education, 1999). Moreover, reading is a core component of teaching and consequently we were surprised that not all the primary school teachers participating in the research reported that there is an expectation for teachers to read professional material at their schools (36 out of 47). Of the 36, fifteen chose the category "agreed", rather than the more strongly affirmative "strongly agreed". Almost a quarter of the teachers (eleven) reported that they were uncertain or disagreed with the statement that there

was an expectation to be involved in professional reading. Fewer than half of the teachers reported that they consciously made time for professional reading each week (nineteen of the 47), while twelve marginally agreed they set aside professional reading time and, of the remaining sixteen who disagreed, the biggest category contained eight who strongly disagreed. Given the expectations and the prioritising of professional reading from the Ministry, the data from our study could be read as a confirmation of Kwakman's (2003) findings around the disappointing participation of teachers in professional reading.

Diversity of responses: The critical roles of relevance and agency

When the responses to the open-ended six topics are read in conjunction with the questionnaire responses, the role of context and relevance appear critical. Three representative examples follow. One teacher (teaching for five to ten years) wrote that she strongly disagreed that she consciously made time for weekly reading at school. She wrote: "About once a month our leaders hand them out [professional readings] but I have no time to do them." She did, however, exercise agency in making time to search online for teaching ideas relevant to her classroom's particular needs: "I find that I get more ideas online." In contrast, those teachers in management roles strongly agreed that they consciously made time for weekly reading and mentioned specific New Zealand authors such as John Hattie and Marie Clay.

A significant number of teachers responded that relevancy was the critical factor. For example, a primary school teacher of sixteen years disagreed with the statement, "I consciously make time for professional reading each week," at school, responding "Did not [at school]". Then the participant wrote, "Add 'now'. Now I do lots of reading...always looking for ideas to understand and help the children in my class." This participant agreed with the questionnaire statement, "colleagues and I talk together about what we read," and annotated this comment with: "At TESOL only." It may be that the diversity of the TESOL group or the relevance of the readings are factors affecting this participant's engagement with readings. Another participant reported minimal engagement with professional reading at school, but commented that he/she had done some bilingual papers last year where she had found a reading that spoke to her and the needs of her students: "I loved reading Cummins because it tells me about empowering minority students".

New Zealand focus of school-based professional reading

In discussing school-based professional development, the teachers listed New Zealand writers and MoE publications almost exclusively. Interestingly the *Education Gazette* was the most commonly nominated professional reading (seven participants) despite it not being a professional development journal. Next most commonly mentioned was Ministry of Education information around national standards (five). Ministry documents dominated and included: the *Best Evidence Syntheses*, *Education Review Office* publications, the *English Language Learning Progressions*, the series *Supporting English Language Learning in Primary Schools*, and the *English Language Intensive Programmes: Information for Schools*. Ministry websites were mentioned in general such as the section on Pasifika learners on the website Te Kete Ipurangi (TKI), and *ESOL Online*. Older Ministry texts were mentioned: *Learner as a Reader*,

Dancing with the Pen. One journal, *SET: Research Information for Teachers*, was also mentioned. New Zealand writers were noted, particularly Timperley and van Hees.

FINDINGS: INTERVIEWS

At the beginning of 2014 in the short-answer question, Mei (teaching between five and ten years, born overseas in an Asian country) reported that, at school she is given readings but, "I don't read any readings. . . I am not a reader and I hardly do any reading." She disagreed that the school-given readings are either interesting or relevant. She reported that she does not consciously make time for professional reading. This was backed up in her interview when she stated that she did not read many of the TESOL readings either: "I think I might have read about four from the last readings book but I think that was all." However, when she reported on the readings she does do, she painted a less disappointing picture. She read with great attention to detail, and went beyond the given when the topic interested her:

When I actually read, when I choose a reading that is relevant to my experience and what I am going through, looking at the reference list and then go: *Where did they get their idea from?* And going through all the reference list and doing their readings.

Mei's reading behaviour changed dramatically when a reading addressed her classroom experiences and her own assignment writing needs. The non-reader became a very close and committed reader, searching out related readings. At the second interview she explained the length of time she spent on a reading, and how reading for assignment work was motivating for her:

So I do the skim reading and I go right, skim read and I go right I see the link between my assignment and the reading and then I read lines by line and I analyse it and it takes me a couple of hours just to do one reading. I need to understand, like I need to understand the whole context and everything to be able to use that for my assignment, yes.

What is more, Mei appropriated the language of the professional readings and so she could explain her teaching practice to her school colleagues:

When I am with other teachers it is easier for me to organise my thoughts using the words that are understandable to others...So having a clear framework or some of the language that I could pick out from some of the readings and share with colleagues helped them understand how to utilise the knowledge and put that into practice.

By interview 2, Mei had modified her attitude to professional reading, describing how readings gave her the confidence to let teachers into her classroom.

I think it [professional reading] helped because once you really understand something it just becomes a part of you and part of your teaching. It just sort of like becomes a part of your DNA, so it just becomes your everyday daily you... So we've got a team of 20 people and they come to me to see how to teach. So I model that sort of thing. And I think readings helps me become who I am and what I am and whatever I do I just think because it's part of me now it just shows.

Mei reported: "I was able to feel more comfortable showing what I was doing. So when they came in they were able to see the links." Being able to select her own readings and go beyond "the given" into her own area of interest changed Mei's attitude to readings. It may be that, in the general curriculum vision of learners at the centre, the critical role of teacher agency in learning has been overlooked.

Tui is a Pasifika teacher, considerably older than Mei, but with five to ten years' teaching experience in New Zealand. She explained that, at school, the teachers received weekly "Bits and Pieces" and attached to these are some reading materials to support their teaching practice, but she reported she had never done professional academic readings before attending the TESOL course. Tui stated that she struggled to get through all the professional readings and that time was the critical factor for her: "Sometimes I stay on until the bell rings at eight o'clock at night. I try and take as much as I can. I stay here and do my readings." She also went to school at the weekends to do her readings. She mentioned the effort it takes to apply the readings on functional grammar in the school setting: "it actually takes time for myself as well to actually teach myself how to present it".

The salient factor for Tui was having readings by, or for, Pasifika people: "Not just New Zealand writers but researchers, there's some Pasifika, they're Māori. Yeah it's not like someone from England, they don't have a background of, or know our children." She then told the most detailed story of the interview—the story of rote learning—as told in the Dickie (2010) reading:

When kids try to memorise everything for White Sunday—How they used more the language at churches and how they learn the talks for the White Sunday and memorise everything and then when you look at them coming to school and they try to memorise stuff but it's not how we put it into our practice, like not memorising books word by word.

Tui could process the key message of the reading because it resonated. She also found that practical stories helped her remember:

They just pull out points and summarise all the main parts of the reading and that way it's easy to remember oh I remember this one because this colleague did it in our group. Sometimes they use personal experiences as well.

Tui remembered the messages, if not the authors: “kids have to do their drawings before they’re writing and I couldn’t remember who wrote it but it was in one of the readings as well, that drawing is part of it”. She remembered her own professional reading presentations to her colleagues, as well as their feedback:

Yes because when I present mine I used my own personal experience about it as well. So that was good. A lot of them just when I spoke about my personal experience a lot of them had their own feedback on it as well. Oh yeah I remember reading it. And the discussion on it just carries on.

For Tui, collaborative talk was essential to help make meaning of the readings and to make connections to other educational ideas:

No there was no, read it by myself, there was nothing there, it was just on your own, here and here, trying to think oh yup. But I did it with my colleague here as well, she did the same paper, and then she’d share, “Oh did you see this on...? For example with Cummins. He wrote this and have you used his stuff?” And, “Oh I didn’t see that, I must’ve scanned through, right through it, I didn’t see it”.

Mei, was the opposite. For her, talk about readings was the least useful part of the TESOL course:

Now least useful, I think I’ve always dreaded listening to other people talk about the readings, that time, I think we get 20 minutes, 15 to 20 or sometimes 25 minutes just listening to them talk...it didn’t really help in terms of understanding the readings I think.

Here, her choice of strong verbs (dreaded) and her repetition of the length of time (20...15...20...25) emphasise the point. She reiterated the same points later in the interview:

I don’t personally find it useful because I tend to shut down when people are...that’s sort of inevitable that they see through their lens and they see the reading through their experience and they talk about their experience. For me I think if someone is presenting a reading it needs to stick to what the reading says.

Unlike Tui, Mei wanted to hear a summary of the reading, but not others’ stories around it. Like Mei, Tui was not so familiar with the language of the academic readings. Tui saw herself as in the same boat as her Pasifika students: reflecting on her own engagement with professional readings clarified the language and learning needs of the students in her classroom.

Yeah. I think my problem is I think I’m like them too, I get to talk like this when I come to write an assignment it’s like I don’t know how to do this in formal language, but I can relate to the children, it’s just a normal language again to learn.

DISCUSSION

The aggregated quantitative data and the two interview vignettes have certain resonances with Kwakman's (2003) and Poskitt's (2005) findings that teachers are more likely to be interested in professional readings which address their observed classroom learning and teaching needs (relevancy). Mei appropriated the language to describe and explain to other teachers the teaching frameworks that she used in planning classroom teaching; Tui found connections in the Pasifika readings that deepened her understanding of classroom experiences and heightened her awareness of inclusion of valued Pasifika learning practices. However, just as motivating were their very personal needs arising from their bilingual and bicultural identities. Mei had arrived in New Zealand as a teenager and her mother tongue was an Asian language, so she valued noticing and then using the academic language. Tui noticed her own academic writing needs being addressed in the readings.

Kwakman (2003) suggests that school contexts may lack the infrastructure to be conducive to teacher learning. Tui constructed meaning by talking through the readings (Putnam & Borko, 2000) with others like her. Tui shaped, and was shaped by, her context becoming a successful learner and teacher applying professional readings in classroom settings in the presence of other Pasifika teachers. The outside school location was an enabling factor for Tui's professional development. Learning and contexts are inseparable. Mei, too, was very selective with the readings she explored. Relevancy to her classroom teaching or assignment writing was the factor for Mei. However, she strongly preferred to do the thinking through on her own.

In interacting with professional readings, the teachers were shaped by their contexts, and in turn, shape their contexts. The two are mutually constituted (Ushioda, 2015). Changes emerge organically within the learner/teacher and within the context when the learners can exercise agency. Tui and Mei both illustrated this clearly. As Mei became more confident with appropriating the academic language of her selected TESOL readings, and as she became convinced of their usefulness, she could theorise her own practice. In being able to select the readings she attended to, Mei read both deeply and widely, allowing her to understand her own practice. The cycle was positive when the teachers viewed themselves as possessing agency. Tui felt the beginnings of power when applying the practices of functional grammar to the classroom and to her own writing. She viewed the language of academic writing as just another language to learn. She was starting to visualise herself doing this. She could see that other Pasifika teachers were successfully engaged in the course and she could draw on their strength. The large numbers in the TESOL classroom allowed the formation of Pasifika teacher groups.

The metaphor of the ecosystem explicates the teachers' varied responses to reading and the organic interconnectedness of social, psychological and environmental processes. Complex processes between learners and their sociocultural environments include opportunities to participate on their own terms, choosing readings that suit their own perceived needs. Empowerment enables one-directional relationships between readings and teachers to become multi-directional. It seems that teachers will not engage deeply with professional readings when the readings do not answer their deep

needs in terms of their own learning. The findings suggest that it is time to write teacher need and teacher agency into Ministry of Education documents that are currently so heavily weighted in favour of student learning needs. The New Zealand curriculum document begins with a vision of what we want for our young people (2007, p. 8). Our findings suggest that awarding teachers a central place in this vision alongside students will benefit all. The data here suggest that affording teachers agency in their professional reading results in increased teacher inquiry enabling them to meet their students' needs more comprehensively and more creatively. Allwright's (2003, 2012) notion of the "teacher scholar" is timely. Principals might consider actioning Allwright's notion by encouraging teachers undertaking professional development to share at staff meetings readings that they have found particularly helpful.

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

We are responding to these initial research findings by making changes to professional readings in the TESOL course. We have reduced the number of core professional readings while encouraging choice. We are more carefully scaffolding the readings by giving a précis of each core reading the week before, an approach that assists comprehension (Grabe & Stoller, 2011) and understanding of relevancy. Where relevant we are relating stories from these readings in order to aid reading motivation. In year two of the TESOL course we have adopted Parrott and Cherry's (2012) recommendations for structuring reading in groups in order to encourage deep reading. Parrot and Cherry suggest assigning specific and weekly rotating roles for each group member's participation (passage master, creative connector, devil's advocate and reporter). This is working judging from our observation of engagement during reading group time, informal feedback and written records on Google Docs.

APPENDIX 1

Please rate these items below

(7) strongly agree (6) agree (5) marginally agree (4) uncertain (3) marginally disagree (2) disagree (1) strongly disagree

Put a cross in the box that most represents your opinion or experience

Current attitudes and practices	7	6	5	4	3	2	1
I enjoy finding new ideas for my teaching in my reading.							
I consciously make time for professional reading each week.							
I rarely undertake professional reading.							
We are introduced to interesting and relevant material in staff professional development sessions at school.							
There is an expectation for teachers to read professional material at my school.							

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR(S)

MARGARET KITCHEN

The University of Auckland

Margaret Kitchen has been a secondary school teacher. She currently teaches on the GradDipTESSOL at The University of Auckland and runs English language classes in her local community. Her current research interests focus on researching teaching practice.

Email: m.kitchen@auckland.ac.nz

SUSAN GRAY

The University of Auckland

Susan Gray, a former primary and secondary school teacher, lectures on the GradDipTESSOL at the University of Auckland. Her research and publications focus on integrated language and content teaching, different stages in teacher development and historical contexts for ESL teaching.

Email: s.gray@auckland.ac.nz

MAREE JEURISSEN

The University of Auckland

Maree Jeurissen lectures on the GradDipTESSOL at the University of Auckland and has been a primary school teacher. Her current research includes collaborations between principals and ESOL teachers, secondary school students' uptake of Te Reo Māori as a subject, and the impact of teaching functional grammar within a Year 5/6 primary school writing programme.

Email: m.jeurissen@auckland.ac.nz



From left to right: Margaret Kitchen, Maree Jeurissen and Susan Gray