In-service Training on Teaching and Learning Formulaic Sequences and its Assessment

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This paper describes a free yearly course taught by research team J033 at Comahue University during 2019 for primary- and secondary-school teachers of English and some insights gained through its formative and summative assessment (Brown, 2004). The course aimed to equip participants with theoretical-practical knowledge on how to teach contextualised formulaic sequences (Wray, 2002) (FSs) through authentic songs, legends and myths, and motivate them to engage in a future pilot experience teaching formulaic language in their own EFL settings.

The paper first discusses some theoretical issues related to formulaic sequences and their teaching in EFL contexts. Then it describes the course in terms of its aims and content, while also considering the different tasks completed by participants for formative and summative assessment. As instances of formative assessment (Brown, 2004), there were face-to-face and virtual group discussions in which teachers discussed key concepts in the bibliography on FS instruction, and oral presentations in which participants described sets of tasks designed for the introduction of FSs in their teaching contexts. Formal summative assessment consisted of three real-life tasks involving the implementation of central content in the course, which were meant to provide an insight into teachers' grasp of the underlying principles of FS teaching (Lindstromberg & Boers, 2008) and their application in EFL classrooms and, by extension, into the extent to which the workshops' objectives may have been accomplished.

The paper analyses some common features in the practical assignments submitted by participants for the assessment of the course. Tasks like summarising the theory to justify decisions on the sequences to teach and relating this to the aims of the tasks they designed posed some challenges to trainees. These challenges are examined and some

implications are also discussed in terms of teaching FSs in in-service teachers' contexts.

Theoretical Background

Formulaic Sequences and the Need for Explicit Instruction in EFL

An important field that has rapidly advanced in applied linguistics research concerns the role of larger units of meaning than single lexical items and their teaching. Throughout the last three decades, traditional views on the nature of the lexicon and its units have shifted and given way to a conception of language no longer made up of grammar rules according to which vocabulary fills the gaps. Through the accumulated findings in corpus linguistics in the last three decades, language has been proved to be composed to a large extent by strings of words that speakers of an L1 community share, are familiar with, understand, expect to hear and use. These chains have received a number of names and different terms have been coined. In this paper, we use the term 'formulaic sequences' defined by Wray (2002) as

> a sequence, continuous or discontinuous, of words or other elements, which is, or appears to be, prefabricated: that is, stored and retrieved whole from memory at the time of use, rather than being subject to generation or analysis by the language grammar (p. 9).

These strings convey specific meanings familiar to the L1 community and usually fulfil pragmatic or discourse functions. Their pervasiveness in language is such that they have been found to make up more than 50% of written language (Erman & Warren, 2000). Siyanova-Chanturia and Pellicer-Sanchez (2019) offer a more complete definition for formulaic language:

> strings of letters, words, sounds [...], contiguous or non-contiguous, of any length, size, frequency, degree of compositionality, literality/figurativeness, abstractness and complexity, [...] that necessarily enjoy a degree of conventionality or familiarity among (typical) speakers of a language community or group, and that hold a strong relationship in communicating meaning (p. 5).

Following these same authors, in this article, the term *formulaic sequences* will be adopted to refer to instances of formulaic language that meet the requirements in the definition above.

Raised awareness of the pervasiveness of these sequences in language has led to a body of research into the functions these units of meaning fulfil in discourse, which are central to speakers' fluency. They also aid comprehension within a language community, freeing up speakers' processing load to help them concentrate on the meanings to be conveyed (Lin, 2019).

Teaching Formulaic Sequences in Foreign Language Settings

Although formulaic language is ubiquitous in every language for the native speakers of that language community, to foreign language learners, FSs become an important obstacle to sounding natural and being understood. Research has shown that even proficient learners of English find it difficult to express ideas by means of the typical and frequent phrases used by native speakers of the language (Alhassan & Wood, 2015; Erman, Forsberg Lundell & Lewis, 2016). They may find it difficult to spot them in the input, and therefore, it may take some time for them to realize the communicative power they hold. While speakers of a language will automatically select a phrase to transmit a whole idea, EFL learners may struggle combining isolated words to convey meanings. This seems to be the case even in university settings with otherwise highly proficient learners (Jones & Haywood, 2004; Zinkgräf & Verdú, 2015). Consequently, researchers like Boers and Lindstromberg (2012) suggest that explicit instruction of FSs should take up part of our class time and that EFL learners' attention needs to be directed to these phrases, their form and meanings.

The obvious contextual differences between learning an L1 and a foreign language highlight certain conditions that foreign language teaching should contemplate to help learners master FSs and authors agree that the teaching of FSs is essential to guarantee effective, natural and appropriate EFL use. Boers and Lindstromberg (2012) and Wood (2015) advocate FS-focused instruction in the classroom to optimize learners'

formulaic language acquisition. For this instruction to be fruitful, a number of conditions need to be met: learners' awareness needs to be raised with respect to the existence and pervasiveness of FSs. In order to do so, explicit focus on the selected sequences should target not only the form of the sequence and its meaning but also certain discourse and pragmatic requirements that call for the use of such a sequence in that particular context. FS instruction will demand a selection of those FSs that both course developers and teachers should judge to be useful and pedagogically relevant to the communicative needs of their learners and to the purpose of the course (Boers & Lindstromberg, 2009). Contextual features like these and learners' individual characteristics may need special consideration in this selection.

FS-focused instruction borrows much from the original Focus-on-Form approaches (Doughty & Williams, 1998; Long & Robinson, 1998) which were implemented in the 90s for the teaching of grammatical features in a foreign language, but in this case, the focus is placed on formulaic sequences. Teachers need to provide learners with input that is seeded with contextually appropriate uses of the selected FSs in the L2, guaranteeing multiple encounters with the target sequences. To aid perception of these phrases, it is advisable to modify the input typographically (through bold type, highlighting or underlining) and give them saliency (Alharthi, 2015). It is also imperative that FSs are presented in both written and oral contexts since prosodic features typical of language production in the oral mode will contribute to learners' perception of FS boundaries and make these phrases become more entrenched in memory (Lindstromberg & Boers, 2008; Pellicer-Sánchez & Boers, 2019).

Following Nation's (2001) processes for the learning of vocabulary - single lexical items -, Lindstromberg and Boers (2008) and Boers and Lindstromberg (2009) offer a set of activities and procedures grouped under three different stages: noticing, retrieval and generative use (Hatami, 2015). As mentioned above, for learners to perceive FSs in the input, their attention needs to be drawn to the occurrence of these sequences in context, and to their form and meaning (noticing). Later, opportunities for learners to

retrieve both the FS's form and meaning from memory are necessary to help them strengthen its form-meaning link (retrieval). At a subsequent stage, tasks where learners can meet them in new, unfamiliar contexts or use these sequences creatively (generative use) are essential for them to "reconceptualize the knowledge" of the focused phrases (Nation, 2001, pp. 68-9).

Selecting which FSs to Teach

Lindstromberg and Boers (2008) stress that certain FSs are more classroom-worthy than others and specify some criteria for teachers to select which FSs to focus on in their lessons: frequency, and linguistic motivation or memorability (p. 15). Boers and Lindstromberg (2009) on their part consider that FSs' usefulness is also a determining factor: based on the courses' characteristics, some sequences may be more necessary for learners to master and useful to convey specific meanings. They recommend that medium-frequency sequences should be the target of explicit instruction and so should more fixed sequences, which offer little choice of alternative components and therefore are more likely to be successfully remembered.

These criteria need to be combined with what they call 'teachability' (Boers & Lindstromberg, 2009, p. 68): some FSs are more susceptible to explicit instruction and better recall rate due to some degree of figurative meaning within their component words. Some chunks are linguistically motivated in that they contain alliteration in their make-up, a certain type of rhythm, or assonance that make them very suitable candidates to become better recalled with the teacher's help. Some other sequences lend themselves to the type of interpretation work based on their (metaphorical) "imageability". This inherent characteristic of some FSs needs to be exploited by teachers through activities that demand certain cognitive elaboration of FSs and that "engage them [learners] in the kind of rich, deep, 'elaborative' mental processing which is known to enhance retention of vocabulary in memory" (Lindstromberg & Boers, 2008, p.13). Wood (2015, p.143) also outlines a number of strategies that can be developed in EFL learners to help these sequences become entrenched in memory and automatized for future use.

The course

This in-service training course was planned as part of the activities of Research Project J033 at Facultad de Lenguas, Universidad Nacional del Comahue. The project had several aims, of which one was to raise EFL teachers' awareness of the significance of formulaic language in foreign language education.

Characteristics, Goals and Participants

Eleven teachers and four teachers-to-be from the provinces of Río Negro and Neuquén (Argentina) completed this nine-month-long in-service training taught by members of the Research Project J033 at Facultad de Lenguas, Universidad Nacional del Comahue. The course was intended for EFL primary and secondary school teachers and was taught from March to December in 2019. Its central aims were to a) equip participants with theoretical-practical knowledge on teaching contextualised FSs through authentic songs, legends and myths and b) engage them in a future pilot experience teaching formulaic language in their own EFL settings. In this experience volunteering teachers who had completed both modules would implement a formulaic approach to the teaching of vocabulary through legends and songs in their own primary school courses. They would be teaching lessons based on the material the research team had especially designed based on the tenets of FS-focused teaching (Lindstromberg & Boers, 2008; Hatami, 2015; Boers & Lindstromberg, 2009). Unfortunately, due to the spread of Covid-19 and the subsequent lockdown, the pilot experience had to be postponed.

Participation in the course was free of charge since it aimed at offering as wide an audience as possible the chance to engage in training in formulaic language teaching. The course was divided into two modules: a) Theoretical Foundations and Planning: Teaching English through Chunks in Legends and Songs and b) Teaching, Assessing and Researching Chunks through Legends and Songs in English. Each 35-hour module consisted of five monthly face-to-face meetings running five and a half hours each and allotted an extra hour and a half per meeting to the reading of selected

material and virtual participation through the university's Moodle platform. This two-module course followed Nation (2001)'s and Lindstromberg and Boers (2008)'s three-step approach to vocabulary learning, which consists of providing EFL learners with opportunities for a) identification, b) retrieval and c) creative use of FSs.

Assessment in the Course

In an attempt to determine the impact of the modules on participants' conceptual framework, both formative and summative assessment tools were adopted during this in-service training experience for EFL teachers on teaching formulaic sequences. Because each of the modules covered different content and had different aims, and because each one needed to be certified institutionally separately, a written summative assessment task was included in both modules.

Formative Assessment Tasks. Brown and Abbeywickrama (2018) define formative assessment as the process involved in "evaluating participants in the process of "forming" their competencies and skills with the goal of helping them to continue that growth" (p. 8). With this purpose in mind, participants in the course were asked to complete some tasks that served as tools to determine their gradual appropriation of the content of the modules. These tasks implied different degrees of difficulty and, as the course progressed, they involved more concepts presented in the meetings.

At different stages throughout both modules, participants analysed some FSs present in songs and in legends, assessed how relevant they might be to learners in their teaching contexts and compared their teachability in terms of the criteria mentioned above. The video-recorded presentations of these group tasks were later input for trainers to explore participants' understanding of some of the concepts presented in the literature. This was especially done through the discussion of the theory they had read for one of the workshops: they considered Lindstromberg and Boers (2008)'s recommendations (pp. 15-16) so as to draw implications that related to their EFL teaching in context.

Trainees were also invited to analyse the applicability of different types of activities to suit the different stages in Nation's (2001) vocabulary learning process and to justify their reasons for the tasks to promote either noticing, retrieval or creative use of the sequences. These sample tasks were the basis on which they were later to design their own. After the discussion during the face-to-face meeting of the theoretical issues presented, they set to redesign the activity to contemplate these concepts and recommendations. In every case they were required to describe a possible context for the tasks, to contribute to raising their awareness of how context-dependent these activities are.

Most of the formative assessment tasks took place in the monthly face-to-face meetings and video-recordings of these meetings offer evidence of participants' interactions when solving these activities, and of their conclusions and doubts. Their comments in those recordings point to key concepts that might have generated some misunderstandings or difficulties, which will be later described.

Summative Assessment Tasks. Another fundamental component was the incorporation of assignments that "aim to measure, or summarize, what [a course participant] has grasped," (Brown & Abbeywickrama, 2018, p. 6). These tasks were part of the certification requirements set by the Consejo Provincial de Educación. In this case, participants completed three real-life tasks (one after module 1 and two after module 2) which intended to assess whether and to what extent they had understood and could apply the core contents of learning and teaching FSs.

At the end of the first module (Theoretical Foundations and Planning: Teaching English through Chunks in Legends and Songs), two tasks were administered. Firstly, participants were asked to choose to work with a fragment of either the lyrics of a song or a legend. On the basis of their choice, they were required to select four FSs they would present to one of their groups of students and a) briefly describe this context so that trainers could get a clear picture of their teaching scenario and b) justify their selection of FSs by referring to the materials they had read throughout the

different sessions and the principles in the literature for such a selection. They were also tasked with designing two activities based on the song/legend and the set of FSs selected and briefly explaining a) their learning objectives, b) the general vocabulary learning processes outlined in Nation, (2001) and Lindstromberg and Boers (2008) that these activities developed and c) their reasons for including these tasks in a teaching sequence.

Participants were required to complete Task 1 individually since it was believed that they might not be sharing the same school setting or context in which they would like to implement the teaching sequence they would design (See Appendix). These assignments were submitted by email. Trainers read them carefully and provided written feedback consisting of comments, suggestions and an overall, impressionistic mark. The main objectives mentioned for the module were the guiding criteria for the marking of these assignments. The submitted assignments first needed to comply with each of the subtasks required, and then show evidence of participants' uptake of the module's content and a personal reflection showing their learning gains and teaching challenges as to the implementation of a FS-based approach in their own contexts. If necessary, participants were invited to resubmit their tasks fifteen days after the feedback.

The second task (after Module 2) required them to teach a simulated lesson on FSs based on a song or a legend to A1 level children outlined in the lesson plan crafted by the trainers. This task was meant to exemplify the role some of these teachers would play in the pilot experience that was supposed to take place in 2020.

As to the final assessment of the second module (Teaching, Assessing and Researching Chunks through Legends and Songs in English), in Task 3 participants were asked to write a report on the key aspects covered by the literature in the whole course. They were expected to a) review the content explored in the module and how it related to those in the first module of this training, b) support their analysis by referring to the reading materials, c) describe the implications of adopting a FS-based approach in their own

teaching contexts, and d) consider the likelihood of its implementation in their own schools as part of this experience.

Some Insights into Participants' Perceptions of the Teaching of FSs

In this section we discuss some comments made by participants that shed light on their understanding of the material presented in the formative assessment tasks. A more in-depth analysis of participants' summative Tasks 1 and 3 follows.

Formative Assessment

Formative assessment tasks were completed mainly in our face-to-face meetings. Based on trainers' observation of trainees' behaviour during the completion of the tasks described in the previous section, it was evident that participants were engaged in the course: they systematically attended sessions and participated in tasks, group and plenary discussions. Their participation was sustained also in forums on the platform and trainees were always up to date with the key readings set from one session to the next. In their active partaking of discussions, they voiced some of the difficulties they found when relating the theoretical concepts presented in the literature to practical aspects. For example, faced with the task to "Select which FSs from this legend they would choose to teach in their context" (second face-to-face meeting during Module 1 in the course), they expressed some doubts such as

(1) "I was not sure…We found many [FSs]" (Participant A)
(2) "The concept [chunk] is a bit broad. What is a chunk? Which are high priority?" (Participant B)

Although the concept had already been presented extensively in the first meeting and key readings introducing it had been analysed, the application of theory to a specific task made them confront these doubts, which triggered further discussion and analysis with trainers. On the other hand, in the same task, Participant C mentioned one strategy in particular that Lindstromberg and Boers (2008) suggest as contributing to the organisation of the vocabulary to be focused on and, therefore, to the ease

with which learners can better recall these sequences: grouping sequences based on semantic fields. This is evinced in (3):

(3) "We selected many and grouped those ones related to 'talking'." (Participant C)

These comments show participants' gradual uptake of the concepts discussed in this second face-to-face meeting on FS selection and teachability. They show how, for some, the concept was so broad that they found it difficult to decide on which FSs to focus. For others, the reading materials had equipped them with practical tools to solve the task.

When trainees were asked to analyse specially designed sample tasks to focus on the formulaic sequences in the selected songs and legends, and, in turn, decide how these could be adapted and implemented in their own educational settings, they mentioned their own learners' characteristics and took measures to cater for some possible shortcomings in the tasks. This is reflected in (4) and (5):

(4) "I was thinking of presenting words in isolation so..." (Participant I)
(5) "I'm not sure if they know some vocabulary. Maybe I need to pre-teach some words." (Participant K)

These statements are taken as evidence of a re-elaboration process on the part of trainees, who were struggling to reconcile both views of language and teaching: focusing on individual words and on FSs.

Summative Assessment

A quick overview of the final assignments (Task 1) submitted by participants for the first module indicates that four trainees successfully completed and passed the task. The remaining nine were asked to take into account the comments, questions and suggestions included in the feedback and to resubmit two weeks later. Some advanced undergraduates taking the course handed in a third version of their work.

Some of the subtasks in Assignment 1 appear to have presented trainees with some degree of difficulty. Justifying their answers and decisions in the task designed while referring to the set readings posed a challenge and at times they had trouble deciding which concepts in the theory presented could help them account for task design. We have included excerpts of the assignments submitted by some of the trainees where reference to the literature is missing or its relevance to the decisions made, unclear.

In Activity 1 designed by Participant E for Task 1, there is evidence of the uptake of concepts like 'noticing' and its importance. However**,** little theoretical background is provided for this activity and no reference is made to Nation's approach to vocabulary teaching (2001). Also, although it is true that this first activity aims at noticing, there is evidence in the task of some form of 'retrieval' fostered as well, when the trainee mentions that its aim is to help learners "remember them by means of singing the song once". Participant E seems unaware of this other process involved in her activity.

> "The students will be given a copy with the song "Shine" by Jason Mraz with empty gaps to fill in with the four chunks in a box. They will listen to the song and complete it with the phrase they listen to. Ss will exchange the copy with his/her classmate so as to check the gaps they completed listening to the song one more time. Then, all together will sing the song. On the blackboard, the teacher will write four definitions for each chunk worked on the song. The students will be given sheets of paper with the phrases and they will stick them in the definitions. Then, they will check together.
> The main objective for these activities is to foster students´ abilities to talk about the topics friendship and support. The first activity is aimed at helping students identify the chunks and remember them by means of singing the song once**.** The **process involved in the learning of vocabulary in this task is noticing** since students encounter the chunks for the first time and they see them repeatedly throughout the song.

> Besides, students will match the phrases with their definitions on the blackboard which makes them enhance the vocabulary." (Participant E)

In the following excerpt from Participant G's Task 1, it is evident that she understands the inherent interrelation between FS selection and the characteristics of the course where they are to be taught. However, little information is offered on the found frequency for the selected sequences and how she has used that information in the task designed.

> The selection of these chunks has been made taking into account first of all the ages and interests of the students I work with and also the level of frequency these ones have in real life communication. (Participant G)

Contrarily, Participant I was very careful to include the results of her own analysis of the relative frequency of possible chunks to select as shown in Table 1 below.

Table 1.

FS Frequencies (Participant I)

CHUNK	WWW	DICTIONARY	BNC	COCA
stopped talking	16,700,000	YES	77	696
fell hopelessly in love with	42,100	YES (fall in love with sb)	1 (fell hopelessly in love with her) 151 (fall in love with)	5 (fell hopelessly in love with) 1191 (fall in love with sb/sth)
caught sight of	3,480,000	YES (catch sight of sb/sth)	263	776
leave me alone	31,900,000	YES (leave sb/	163	1107

		sth alone)		

She also refers to this criterion (frequency) in combination to Boers and Lindstromberg's (2009) utility, basing this connection on the readings for the course.

> As regards the second criterion, utility, Boers & Lindstromberg (2009) state that "which chunks are particularly useful for a given group of students depends ultimately on their level of proficiency and on the objectives of the course they are taking."[1] Taking into consideration the first aspect, the chunks selected contain words that might result familiar to the students in the 3rd year of secondary school who have an elementary-intermediate level of English proficiency; therefore, these chunks would be easy for learners to remember them. (Participant I)

However, some degree of misunderstanding and misapplication of concepts in the literature was also found in their justifications for their choice of activities (see Participant B's excerpt below).

> The teaching of these chunks will be useful since chunks facilitate fluent language production and achieve communicative purposes successfully. The mastery of them can help students sound more natural as they will sound linguistically accurate. They "appear to be stored in the long-term memory as single memorized units (i.e., prefabricated chunks or ready-made wholes) and can therefore be processed and accessed more quickly and easily than the same sequences of words when generated creatively.' (Sarvena Hatami, 2014). (Participant B)

Although a citation of the literature analysed has been included, the purpose of this quote is not clear, since no connection is established with the activities proposed or the justification behind them. The implications for the tasks designed that derive from this general quote are not made explicit.

Task 3 in the summative assessment of Module 2 asked participants to reflect on their learning experiences from both modules. Participant A submitted a very thorough reflection that connected the content of all the sessions in the training course, of which an excerpt is included below.

> "This new approach brings about Nation's (2001) three psychological processes needed to help students remember these sequences of words, i.e. Chunks: noticing, retrieval and generative use. As a start, we got a deep introduction to the study of words (Nation, 2001), the implications of learning vocabulary (Schmitt, 2010), last but least, the notion of chunks (Lindstromberg and Boers, 2008). In later meetings, we carried out activities designed on the basis of Nation's guidelines for effective vocabulary learning which were suitable for primary students concerning with the short time of the classes, students' interests and a variety of activities. Needless to say, the chosen songs and legends were presented in an appropriate way. Both included different instances of presentation of vocabulary, repetition of the selected chunks and matching activities for instance, to be carried out in three steps: before, during and after dealing with them. In addition to this, the content of the songs and legends are related with students' personal experiences and in this way, this methodology helps students foster their creativity through hypothesizing and giving personal opinions on certain situations, thus making the learning of the chunks memorable for the learners." (Participant A)

In this final task for Module 2 in the course, Participant A threads together the different reading materials explored and analysed in the course, highlighting their most important contributions to the teaching of formulaic sequences, and linking these to the tasks completed in the face-to-face meetings. In her assignment, she justifies task design purposes and FS selection in terms of the context where trainees work. This excerpt offers a wider perspective than Task 1 by one trainee in particular of the whole in-service training course in retrospective. The long-term learning process

seems to have been positive and clarifying, even if in Task 1 difficulties and obstacles were encountered.

This section has offered some insights into participants' appropriation process of the content of the in-service training course taught during 2019 in justifying their decisions and designs in the light of the theory discussed. These challenges, however, reflect participants' first submission of the task. Through a process approach to their assignments, and guided by feedback offered by the course's trainers, they overcame these difficulties and achieved the goals set for the course. Their final versions and Task 3 solved many of the issues highlighted in the excerpts above, and show evidence of their intake of the main content and activities of this training experience on the teaching of formulaic sequences in EFL settings.

Implications for the Future

Extensive research into language and vocabulary learning and teaching has confirmed the ubiquity and usefulness of FSs. On these grounds, it is imperative that EFL teachers are informed about these findings and trained to help their students to incorporate these strings of words into their active repertoire. Because FSs are "just "big words" (Thornbury, 2019, p. 6), most principles of effective vocabulary teaching apply equally to the teaching of chunks as they do to the teaching of individual words (Lindstromberg & Boers, 2008). Therefore, teachers will need to make sure they a) teach chunks in context, b) clarify both their meaning and form, c) allow for opportunities to practise them in guided and meaningful contexts, d) review and recycle them systematically and e) equip learners with a set of strategies for the identification, recording and recycling of FSs (Lindstromberg & Boers, 2008). These methodological priorities in the teaching of vocabulary are captured by Nation's (2001) three-stage approach, based on EFL learners' a) recognition, b) controlled intensive practice and c) generative application in true-to-life scenarios of the target vocabulary items. As to the criteria for selecting and sequencing chunks, EFL teachers need to be sensible and practical to draw their students' attention to those set phrases that are a) relatively frequent, b) useful and relevant to their learners'

communicative needs, c) memorable for their contexts and background knowledge and d) teachable in the EFL classroom. Their learners' age, level of proficiency and the purpose of the course should also guide teachers in this selection. As learning vocabulary is usually laborious with many learners, these informed decisions should be combined with small doses of FSs to focus on and with multiple natural opportunities for EFL learners to encounter them and identify their boundaries, patterns, and usage restrictions.

In sum, since FSs are intrinsic components of the lexicon, the greatest challenge is to raise EFL teachers' awareness of "their pervasiveness [...] and potential in promoting fluency (Granger & Meunier, 2008, p. 248)" so that learners can be aided in their own perception, practice and use of FSs. In this respect, in-service teacher training plays a pivotal role.

Notes

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