CONTINUING PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT – A HIGH PRIORITY FOR FOREIGN LANGUAGE TEACHERS

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Abstract: The paper at hand investigates the lifelong development of English language teachers irrespective of the stage of their career. As we live in a world which is constantly changing, English language teachers should keep themselves acquainted with changes related to the teaching of the English language including the emerging technological tools that represent an invaluable support for the teaching/learning/evaluation process of any language, the innovative methods of teaching as well as the current students' needs. Thus, the main objective of the current article is to present, on the one hand, the arguments for the need of continuing development of the English language teachers, and, on the other hand, to present the ways the English language teachers can continuously develop themselves in order to hold good on all occasions and be permanently open to new possibilities.

Keywords: teachers' professional development, continuing development, self-development, collaborative development, formal development.

Abbreviations:
ELT – English Language Teaching
P.E.T. - Preliminary English Test
RSA Dip. - Royal Society of Arts diploma
TEFL - Teaching English as a Foreign Language
IATEFL - International Association of Teachers of English as a Foreign Language

On Defining Professional Development

Teachers' professional development is demanding. It is demanding for those with a remit to provide it and demanding for those on the developing end, as it expects to influence classroom practice while taking on the concerns of the provider and the participant [9, p.1]. According to Jack J. Richards et al., the need for ongoing teacher education has been a recurring theme in language teaching circles in recent years and has been given renewed focus as a result of the emergence of teacher-led initiatives such as action research, reflective teaching, and team teaching [8, p. 1].

What is *Teacher Professional Development*? In Marry Spratt's point of view, no single definition will suffice to clearly understand what is teacher development. The author offers several examples of teachers' development which may help to characterize a "family resemblance":

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1. Teacher A feels constantly under stress, is sleeping badly and is off her food. She decides to act. After reading articles/books on stress and personal organization, she decides to set aside 30 minutes "quiet time" daily and to use this to make lists of personal action points.
2. Teacher B finds a good practical idea in P.E.T.! He decides, with a colleague, to try it out for a month and to discuss progress once a week.
3. Ten teachers from school X decide to meet once a month to discuss a book or article all agreed to read.
4. Eight teachers from School Y decide to meet once a month to talk over problems individuals have encountered. There is no agenda but the group is tolerant and mutually supportive.
5. Teacher C decides to take a course on a non-ELT subject, which she thinks may give new insights for her teaching
6. Teacher D decides to improve his qualifications. He enrolls on a RSA Dip. TEFL course.
7. Teacher E has never written a publication. She decides to review a recent book she feels enthusiastic about. She seeks advice from more experienced colleagues on how to write it and who to submit it to.
8. Teacher G and H decide to implement ideas they have on learners independence. They set up a small action research project. They present their findings at the next IATEFL Conference [pp. 54-55].

In the specialized literature, professional development is defined as a career-long process in which educators fine-tune their teaching to meet student's needs. As such, it directly tackles teachers' teaching style – the patterns of decisions teachers make when mediating their student's learning [5, p. 5]. In my own terms, teachers' professional development encompasses the totality of activities (formal, non-formal or informal) teachers make use of in order to enhance their personal growth and job skills by developing their knowledge continuously and keeping themselves abreast of any development in the field of ELT, including the use of new technologies that represent an invaluable support in the teaching/learning/evaluation process of a foreign language, the innovative methods of teaching as well as the current students' needs in order to contribute to outstanding educational results for students and to increase their contributions within the educational community.

Moreover, professional development is a purposeful and intentional process. It is a continuously design effort to bring about positive change and improvement. Professional development is not, as some perceive it to be, a set of random, unrelated activities that have no clear direction or intent. True professional development is a deliberate process, guided by clear vision of purposes and planned goals [13, p.17]. Jack C. Richards, Farrell C, Thomas S. present examples or goals from a development perspective:

- Understanding how the process of second language development occurs;
- Understanding how our roles change according to the kind of learners we are teaching;
- Understanding the kinds of decision-making that occur during lessons;
- Reviewing our theories and principles of language teaching;
- Developing an understanding of different styles of teaching;
- Determining learners' perceptions of classroom activities [8, p. 4].

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In addition to the goals of the professional development of teachers proposed by Jack C. Richard et el., I believe that professional development of teachers encompasses as well the development of teachers professional culture as the teachers do not influence the students just professionally, but they have a huge ethical and moral influence on the students as the students often take their teachers as their role models in life. Thus, cultural development must be one of the goals of the teachers' professional development. In order to avoid or minimize the negative reactions and negative attitudes that might occur, teachers must train themselves and develop cultural competence, which is defined by Bushnaq T. as being the teachers' ability to effectively work with people who have different integrated patterns of human behaviour that include values, thoughts, actions, beliefs as well as different social, ethnical or religious groups. Therefore, by being culturally competent, the teacher can prevent cultural conflicts which might affect teacher - student as well as teacher- teacher relationships [1, p. 107]. Therefore, professional development implies the everyday growth of teachers in terms of knowledge, skills, aptitudes and attitudes, competences that subsequently will contribute to the formation of free and creative personalities, capable of integrating themselves in this continuously changing world.

According to Jack C. Richards et al. there are two perspectives of teachers' professional development: individual and institutional. Professional development is directed towards both the institution's goals and the teacher's own personal goals. Achieving personal growth and improving departmental performance can go hand in hand. From the point of view of the teacher's personal development, a number of areas of professional development may be identified:

- *Subject-matter knowledge*. Increasing knowledge of the disciplinary basis of TESOL – that is, English grammar, discourse analysis, phonology, testing, second language acquisition research, methodology, curriculum development, and the other areas that define the professional knowledge base of language testing;
- *Pedagogical expertise*. Mastery of new areas of teaching, adding to one's repertoire of teaching specialisations, improving ability to teach different skill areas to learners of different ages and backgrounds;
- *Self*-awareness. Knowledge of oneself as a teacher, of one's principles and values, strengths and weaknesses;
- *Understanding the learners.* Deepening understanding of learners, learning styles, learners' problems and difficulties, ways of making content more accessible to learners;
- *Understanding the curriculum and materials.* Deepening one's understanding of curriculum and curriculum alternatives, use and development of instructional materials;
- *Career advancement.* Acquisition of the knowledge and expertise necessary for personal advancement and promotion, including supervisory and mentoring skills.

Regarding the institutional perspective, Jack Richard believes that teacher development is often referred to as staff development and usually takes the form of in-service training. Hence, the professional development has the following goals:

- *Institutional development*. Improvement of the performance of the school as a whole, that is, to make it more successful, attract more students, and achieve better learning outcomes;

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- *Careers development*. It facilitates the professional advancement of teachers to more senior positions in the institution;
- *Enhanced levels of student learning*. An important goal is to raise the achievement levels of students in the institution, a goal that is not only important for its own sake but also adds to the reputation of the institution and its teachers [8, p. 9-11].

The Need for the Teacher's Professional Development

Why do teachers need professional development? The specialized literature provides several answers to this question. For instance, Palmer (1998, p. 2) has observed that some teachers can lose heart over the years because teaching becomes a "daily exercise in vulnerability" for them [12, p. 15]. As a consequence, teachers have to work on their craft in order to overpass this daily routine of teaching the English language.

Usually every English teacher has an initial training and a teaching qualification. However, as Paul Davies and Eric Pearse stipulate, the initial training should be the beginning and not the end of a teacher's professional training. They believe that teacher development programs can facilitate regular contact with new ideas and their classroom application [4].

In Mary Spratt's opinion, there are at least five overlapping reasons for the need of teacher development:

- A feeling that training courses cannot alone satisfy all trainees' needs;
- A need to go beyond mere training;
- The search for a sense of directions which characterizes the increasing professionalization of ELT;
- The growing confidence of teachers in their ability to shape their own growth;
- The influence of the wider life-long education movement [10, p. 54].

Noteworthy to mention in his context is the National Education Association whose members believe that one of the most compelling reasons for the need of professional development is that student achievement depends on rigorous standards and a knowledgeable education team. To have high standards for students, there must be high standards for the staff members who work with them [14]. Development generally refers to general growth not focused on a specific job. It serves a longer-term goal and seeks to facilitate growth of teachers' understanding of teaching and of themselves as teachers. It often involves examining different dimensions of teacher's practice as a basis for reflective review and can hence be seen as "bottom –up" [8, p.4].

It is often said that "good teachers are born not made"; and it does seem that some people have a natural affinity for their job, says Harmer J. But there are also others, perhaps, who do not have what appears to be a natural gift but who are still effective and popular teachers, states the author. Such teachers learn their craft through a mixture of personality, intelligence, knowledge and experience (and how they reflect on it). And even some of the teachers who are apparently "born teachers" weren't like that at the beginning at all, but grew into the role as they learnt their craft [7, p. 23].

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Jack J. Richards et.al (2005), emphasizes the fact that the need for ongoing renewal of professional skills and knowledge is not a reflection of inadequate training but simply a response to the fact that not everything teachers need to know can be provided at a pre-service level, as well as the fact that the knowledge base of teaching constantly changes [8, p.1]. As Thomas R. Guskey states, education is a dynamic professional field with a continually expanding knowledge base. Our knowledge in nearly every subject area and academic discipline is expanding. So, too, is our understanding of how individuals learn and of the structures and procedures that contribute to effective learning environments. To keep abreast of this new knowledge and understanding, continues the author, educators at all levels must be continuous learners throughout the entire span of their professional careers. They must constantly analyze the effectiveness of what they do, reflect on their current practices, make adaptations when things are not going well, and continually explore new alternatives and opportunities for improvement [13, p. 19].

Professional Development Pathways for English Teachers

Due to the development of the new technology, nowadays English language teachers have a variety of opportunities to develop professionally in order to meet the current requirements of teaching English to the students of other languages in general, and to meet the students' needs, in particular. We are living in a changing world and the need to learn English as a second or foreign language has become one of the necessities for almost every individual irrespective of his or her status in society. Consequently, language teachers have the responsibility to make sure that they use the latest innovations in the field of teaching a foreign language and help learners to master the language with pleasure so that they develop and intrinsic motivation towards learning the English language which has become an venue towards gaining one's existence as by knowing the English language, people have more opportunities to find a better job, to travel around the world, or to simply search for information using the internet.

As I have already stated, citing Thomas R. Guskey, professional development is an intentional purpose. The author continues his idea by saying that in order to ensure that professional development processes are intentional, the following steps are recommended:

1. *Begin with a clear statement of purposes and goals.* It is essential that we be explicit about the goals of professional development, especially in terms of the classroom or school practices that we hope to see implemented and the results that we would like to attain in terms of students.
2. *Ensure that the goals are worthwhile.* Not all purposes and goals are equally important or valuable. Thus, relating professional development purposes and goals to the mission of the school is a positive first step.
3. *Determine how the goals can be assessed.* It is also essential to decide, up front, what evidence we would trust in determining if the goals are attained. This evidence will be different, of course, depending on the purposes and the goals that are set. It is important to keep in mind, too, that multiple indicators are likely to be necessary in order to tap both intended and unintended consequences [13, p. 18].

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Although the issue of exactly how teachers can develop themselves continuously is a debate matter within the scientific community, researching the area of teachers' professional development, I adopt Paul Davies and Eric Pearse's idea that development option can be grouped into three broad categories: *Self-development, Co-operative Development, and Formal Development* [4, p. 197].

Self-Development is taking personal responsibility for one's own learning and development through a process of assessment, reflection, and taking action [15]. Thus, it is important that teachers start their career by committing themselves to continuously improving their knowledge and constantly reflecting upon their teaching results. Paul Davies and Eric Pearse suggest that teachers could ask themselves the following questions:

- How effective was the lesson in general?
- How did the learners respond to the different activities?
- What good bits were there, and why were they good? How could I develop them further?
- What weak bits were there, and why were they weak? How could I have handled them better? [4, p. 198].

Moreover, by answering the above questions, teachers will constantly reflect upon their teaching success or failure, a fact that will lead to the improvement of their teaching experience. Therefore, in J. Harmer's opinion, if real development can only come from within, then it is by looking inside ourselves and seeking to understand or change what we find there that is likely to be the most effective way of moving forward and making things better [6, p. 411]. As a matter of fact, by observing ourselves, we can better understand who we are.

Self-development can also be achieved through diary writing, recording lessons and reading [4, p. 198-199], [6, p. 410-413], action research, teaching portfolios and case study using the "Tree of life" [12, p. 17], critical incidents [8, p. 14.]. The "Tree of life" representing the teacher's personal and professional journey [12, p. 17], [8, p. 14].

It is my belief that a very useful tool for self-development is the self-regulated reading. Nowadays, due to the internet access in several countries, teachers have access to a variety of books, magazines, specialized journals, even websites which describe the way teachers can make use of the newest activities in the classroom and assists teachers to try new ideas in reconstructing their knowledge about teaching. By reading the newest literature in the field of teaching the English language, teachers will gain more knowledge about their job including how to work with groups where students are of different levels, how to work with large classes, how to arrange students in the classroom, how to meet students' needs in general by making use of the newest methods, techniques and activities. There are numerous websites for English language teachers which constitute a supporting tool to sustain continuing professional development. To me, a very useful website, is the English teachers forum supported but the British Council (http://www.teachingenglish.org.uk/forum), where teachers can ask questions related to teaching to their colleagues around the world, and offer their suggestions too. On the *Teaching English* teachers section, they can also have their own blog and express their opinion by adding comments across the site. Or, teachers can join the English club (http://www.englishclub.com/tefl/viewforum.php?f=17), and namely the *Teach English* section where teachers can find materials and pages designed to help in their teaching. There are also different Teaching Tips and online teacher-to-teacher discussion. School teachers, for example, may join the eTwinning community (www.etwinning.com) which is the community for schools

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in Europe. It offers the possibility for teachers, head teachers, librarians, etc. to communicate, collaborate, develop projects, share ideas and experiences.

Hence, there are several ways teachers can achieve professional development; it depends on the teachers' motivation and good will to keep themselves up to date, working on their craft so that they become higher in terms of knowledge in their profession.

With regard to the *co-operative development*, it is a fact that most successful organizations depend on the people working effectively together in teams, but special efforts often have to be made to develop teamwork in educational institutions as teaching is generally seen as an individual activity. In Jack J Richards's opinion, the goals of collegial forms of professional development are to encourage greater interaction between teachers, peer-based learning through mentoring, and sharing skills, experience, and solutions to common problems. Collaborative professional development projects allow task and responsibilities to be shared [8, p. 12]. Co-operative development is essential to teachers, as teachers, like anyone else, need chances to discuss what they are doing and what happens to them in class so that they can examine their beliefs and feelings. Talking with colleagues is one of the best ways of resolving one's doubts and uncertainties and it can help teachers understand what it is they think. As listeners (understanders) too, teachers can have a powerful effect on their colleagues' development. [6, p. 418-419]. Hence, as Jack Richards states, cooperation becomes a value that can guide the process of teachers development [8, p. 12].

Successful collaborative teams must operate according to certain principles. These principles are explained by Cohen (1994); Jacob, Power, and Wan Inn (2002); Johnson and Johnson (1984); and Kagan (1994) cited in [5, p. 26]: Cooperation is a value; teams are heterogeneous; team members are interdependent; the members are individually accountable; the members interact simultaneously; all team members should have the chance for equal participation; team members need to learn the core cooperative skills that will help them succeed. The author considers, based on research, that cooperation teams usually go through the following four stages:

- **Stage 1.** Members are uncertain of their roles and the expected level of dependence on team leaders;
- **Stage 2.** Members compete to assert their individuality within the team;
- **Stage 3**. Members renew their commitment to team objectives and develop trust in one another.
- **Stage 4**. Teams achieve their goals by becoming more cohesive and focused on the tasks at hand. They value the individual contributions of members.

Nevertheless, the author emphasizes the fact that not all teams will progress though each stage in the same fashion and some may not even reach the final stage, becoming dysfunctional and unable to achieve their objectives. School culture, leadership, styles, and individual personalities can have a profound effect on whether a team succeeds or not [5, p. 30]. Therefore, as Thomas S. and Farrell C. stipulate, *teacher development groups* provide a context where participants can reflect on and come to understand their classroom practices, and plan their professional growth and development together in a safe place [12, p. 121].

The specialized literature provides us with numerous ideas and strategies regarding the teachers' professional development based on collaboration with others. For instance, Jeremy Harmer points out that teachers may develop professionally by using peer teaching or

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observation, teachers' groups, teachers' associations (conferences and seminars, different kinds of presentations), the virtual community, [6, p. 418-422]. Jack J. Richards et al. consider that collaborative development implies: peer coaching, peer observation, critical friendship, action research, critical incidents and team teaching [8, p. 14], while Paul Davies and Pearse Eric present two techniques of co-operative development: sharing with colleagues, and peer observation [4].

Therefore, the way I see things, based on the suggestions given by the above mentioned researchers, it can be assumed that collaborative professional development can be achieved through: peer teaching or observation, teachers' groups, teachers' associations (conferences and seminars, different kinds of presentations, the virtual community, critical friendship, action research, critical incidents and team teaching, and of course sharing our ideas and experiences with our colleagues. From my point of view, teachers can start developing professionally using peer teaching and peer observation. Unfortunately, many teachers are averse to the idea of peer teaching or peer observation. They feel worried about the possible criticism from the part of their colleagues. They are afraid of showing their weaknesses to others or they simply don't acknowledge the need and the advantages to be observed by a colleague or to observe a colleague. That's why there are very few teachers who welcome this practice. It is necessary to point out the fact that to be observed and criticized is not humiliating; rather one can take advantage of this criticism and make it constructive. We can search for ways to make things more effective. The peer observation technique can benefit the observer as well as the one who is observed. By observing others, one may question his or her own assumptions, thus he or she will work on his or her own professional development. The fact of observing others can give teachers a better perspective on their own work.

Research suggests that collaboration is an important component of teacher professional development because it involves teachers sharing their personal and professional knowledge with other teachers. As a result of participating in teachers development groups, say Matlin and Short (1991), teachers can change their thinking about the work and as a result, they can become more confident practitioners [cited in 12, p. 121]. Teachers can also learn a great deal by attending conferences, taking part in seminars, workshops, shot courses, and summer schools where they can listen to others talking about the new activities as well as the successes or the failures they have had with them. Nevertheless, not every teacher can afford to attend conferences or workshops as it requires, in most cases, time and money. It is a well-known fact that in many countries, teachers aren't remunerated appropriately. Thus, in order to be able to participate to a workshop for example, teachers need, first of all, to afford it.

I consider sharing ideas and experiences with colleagues to be the simplest way to develop oneself professionally as we can find colleagues whose concerns are similar to ours. As Paul Davies and Eric Pearse mention, the teachers in an institution ought to communicate with one another, principally for the sake of the learner. It is a matter of professional ethics that the staff of any educational institution should work together, not against one another or in isolation. The benefits of this can be enormous for learners as well as for teachers. By sharing with their colleagues, teachers can measure their achievement against a more objective standard [4, p. 199].

Nowadays, due to the development of the Information Technologies, virtual teachers group, via which teachers from different countries with different cultural background meet, allow teachers maintain tangible contact by sharing their own ideas and experiences, can ask or give

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advice to their unknown colleagues. The virtual teachers' rooms have the advantage of allowing teachers to "meet" at the most convenient times. Moreover, as Charalambos Vrasidas and Gene V. Glass assume, the demands of work and family life for teachers, many of whom are women, underline the need for the professional development activities that can be delivered at any time, anywhere [2, p. 4]. Although online professional development is widely used, there are many barriers to effective participation in such initiatives. One of these is limited teacher access to the Internet, which results in certain groups of teachers being disadvantaged, thus increasing the gap between the "haves" and the "have-nots" considers Clark (2000) [cited in 2, p. 5]. Hence, we must acknowledge that online professional development offers opportunities that are often not available to many teachers [2, p. 5].

With regard to the *formal development*, there are different in-service training programs offered by educational establishments. There are also many organizations which offer different specialized courses for different teaching sectors. English language teachers can also consider the fact of going forward to study at Master's or Doctoral level [6, p. 425]. The in-service training teachers undertake, apart from improving the teaching skills, will also raise their professional status and increase their value [4, p. 201].

Formal development can be achieved through online media as well. Dede et al. (2006) state that the provision of professional development through online media has had a significant influence on the professional lives of a growing number of teachers. Growing number of educators content that online teacher professional development has the potential to enhance and even transform teachers; effectiveness in their classrooms and over the course of their career. They also acknowledge that it raises many challenges questions regarding costs, equity, access to technology, quality of materials, and other issues [cited in 3, p. 2].

Hence, teacher's professional development is a lifelong process with no fixed route and no real end. Susan Rodrigues considers that teachers' professional development has to be of an intrinsic value to individual teachers if it is to influence teaching. The researcher stipulates that the changes in pedagogical content knowledge must start from the teachers' perspective and requires teachers' ownership of the change process [9, p. 5]. Moreover, teachers ought to have the awareness of the benefits of ongoing professional development. Excellent professional development will provide teachers with opportunities to think like experts in making instructional decisions, structuring learning activities, and employing sound pedagogical strategies under authentic circumstances.

Professional development of teachers presents a unique circularity unlike professional development in any other field: the recipients are being taught how to teach; it follows that the teaching staff itself must exemplify all that is best in pedagogy [2, p. 3]. Mary Spratt considers that the teacher development movement is in many ways parallel to the Learner Independent movement as learners appear to make better progress when they make their own learning decisions, the chances are that teachers too will achieve better personal and professional growth when they take personal responsibility for their own development [p. 55]. Thus, the professional development must not be viewed as a 3 or 4 days of the school severely restricts educators' opportunities to learn. Just Thomas R. Guskey says that if we view professional development as an ongoing process, job-embedded process, every day presents a variety of learning opportunities. These opportunities occur every time a lesson is taught, an assessment is administered, a curriculum is reviewed, a professional journal or magazine is read, a classroom

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activity is observed, or a conversation takes place with another teacher or administrator. The challenge is to take advantage of these opportunities, to make them available, to make them purposeful, and to us them appropriately [13, p. 19]. And, as Carol Frederick Steel suggests, it is important that teachers:

- Assume there are things you do not know. Keep assuming this for as long as you teach. If you hear a fact that is "wrong" from students, friends, or the media, look it up to verify your own interpretation. Sometimes you will be humbled, but improved.
- Make a plan for deepening your knowledge and follow your plan. Read or listen to books. Subscribe to useful sources of information. Take a course. Join a professional organization and attend conferences. This will take time you do not have. Do it anyway.
- When you make an error, admit it to students, so they can know the truth. They may already know you were incorrect. If they don't, their respect for you will grow, along with their factual knowledge. Remember, you are their role model for lifelong learning.

Thus, as a result to this investigation I conclude that in order to grow professionally teachers have, first of all, to self-monitor themselves. Constant reflection is thus necessary. Undoubtedly, the reading of the specialized literature is the best and most available means of improving teachers' knowledge and keeps them up to date with new ideas about the teaching/ learning/evaluation process. They can also use peer teaching and peer observation hence evaluating the work of their colleagues as well as assessing their own work. Teachers may collaborate with their colleagues, be they real or virtual. Moreover, it is of a great importance for teachers to adopt a research attitude towards their development. Books and articles written by teachers and theorists will often open their eyes to new possibilities. In conclusion I assume that the process of teachers' professional development aims at promoting teachers professional growth. The goal of the continuing professional development is to strengthen teachers' competencies by gaining knowledge and pedagogical skills; a fact that will inevitably improve the teaching/evaluation process as well as the student's learning performance.

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