

# Professional Development: A Path To Success For EFL Teachers

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## ABSTRACT

*Professional development is seen as a way to maintain and enhance the quality of teachers. The acquired knowledge does not only bring about improvement in the teaching process, but also leads to career growth. This article discusses the concept of professional development in the field of language teaching which is distinctive from other fields. The emphasis here is on what are various methods of development they can use to improve themselves continually. Also, there are a lot of contents in the context of language teaching they require for classroom practice. Although language teachers are to gain new theories and practices, they sometimes encounter some problems in their professional development. These problems can be solved by school administrators and teachers themselves.*

**Keywords:** self-development; professional development; language teacher

## INTRODUCTION

With regard to educational reform in Thailand that brings a new “learning” paradigm or so-called “student-centeredness,” it’s a crucial mission for all Thai teachers to provide the students with suitable learning activities that promote them to be active learners. As everyone knows, student-centred learning focuses on the student’s needs, abilities, interests, and learning styles with the teacher as a facilitator of learning. The students will be trained to be self-directed and life-long learners, to be immunized from the rapid changes, and to live a considerably good and moderated life in a society. So, working as a language teacher nowadays is not easy; one requires a set of discrete skills-lesson planning, techniques for presenting, interesting activities as well as new teaching points for teaching the four main skills of language. Teachers must prepare to teach a wide range of students in terms of interest, motivation and ability, some of whom may need additional assistance and these behavioral characteristics are said to have effects on the students in learning English. Also, they should assess students’ needs, abilities and respond to those needs accordingly with preparedness on a class-by-class basis.

It is true that, as language teachers, we must make decisions all the time. Some of our decisions are relatively minor ones; others might have more profound implications. We might ask ourselves, “What should be the goal of language instruction?” “Which language teaching method will be most effective?” There’s no single correct answer to questions like these. The answers that we get can be different as teachers have their own choice to choose the most appropriate approach for their classes.

## THE CONCEPT OF PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

According to Adams & Pierce (1999), having many years of experience doesn’t guarantee expert teaching; experience is useful only when the teacher continually engages in self-reflection and modifies classroom techniques to better serve the needs of students. And teacher development is one of the ways that provides the answer in itself. When teachers are occasionally introduced to new theories and practices of teaching, they will have an opportunity to reframe the ways in which they reflect upon their own teaching, so they can produce more satisfactory performance in class.

Richards (2002) defines teacher development as a continuous process which can lead to doing a better job and to professional growth. It is an expansion of skills and understanding that all teachers should obtain the same

way as students need for learning a language. It often involves examining different dimensions of one's own practice as a basis for reflective review, and can be seen as "bottom-up". The idea of teacher development is clarified by Richards & Farrell (2005, p.4) that it serves as a longer-term goal and growth of teachers' understanding of teaching and of themselves as teachers. They also add some examples of goals from a development perspective as follows:

1. Understanding how the process of language development occurs
2. Understanding how teachers' roles change according to the kind of learners they are teaching
3. Understanding the kinds of decision-making that occur during lessons
4. Reviewing one's own theories and principles of language teaching
5. Developing an understanding of different styles of teaching
6. Determining learners' perceptions of classroom activities

Professional development is a long-term investment and involves a process of growth and change including an expansion of skills and understanding. This idea is supported by Richards & Lockhart (1995) who indicate that language teaching is not universally regarded as a profession – that is, as having unique characteristics, as requiring specialized skills and training, and as being a lifelong and valued career choice.

Likewise, Day (1999) gives the concept of teacher professional development as follows:

*Professional development consists of all natural learning experiences and those conscious and planned activities which are intended to be of direct or indirect benefit to the individual, group or school and which contribute, through these, to the quality of education in the classroom. It is the process by which, alone and with others, teachers review, renew and extend their commitment as change agents to the moral purposes of teaching; and by which they acquire and develop critically the knowledge, skills and emotional intelligence essential to good professional thinking, planning and practice with children, young people, and colleagues through each phase of their teaching lives. (p.18)*

As mentioned earlier, it can be concluded that teachers in the new paradigm should be active and capable. Their teaching needs to be improved and developed in accordance with social changes, academic growth, and the needs of the learners.

## **PRINCIPLES OF EFFECTIVE TEACHER DEVELOPMENT**

Professional development requires an ongoing commitment. It is not something that teachers do just while in a teacher education program or at the beginning of a teaching career. In other words, even the most experienced teacher can learn new things about teaching. Bull (1994) proposes five general principles for effective professional development emerging from the view of overall school improvement:

1. It is school-based. One of the advantages of this approach is that it gets teachers involved in the design and implementation of their own professional development activities, which can be essential to the success of those activities.
2. It uses coaching and other follow-up procedures. It is found that single training sessions with no follow-up are ineffective.
3. It is collaborative. Self-development requires the cooperation of others. Setting the activities which isolate teachers from their peers should be avoided. In this sense, successful development works best as a collaborative endeavor.
4. It is embedded in the daily lives of teachers, providing for continuous growth. That is, continuous learning opportunities need to become part of teachers' everyday working lives and part of every school's institutional priorities.
5. It focuses on student learning and is evaluated at least in part on that basis. Therefore, professional development should be judged primarily by its effects on students. The best way to judge the effects of this development is to conduct some sort of evaluation beyond the standard five-point scale questionnaire used after so many in-service sessions.

## DISTINCTIVE ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHERS

Although the general principles of teacher development above can apply to all fields, there seem to be some other rules regarding the nature of language teacher that should be taken into consideration. The foreign and second language teaching presents learning objectives, tasks, and environments that are qualitatively distinct from those of other subjects. This concept is supported by a comparative study conducted by Borg (2006) examining ways in which language teachers are seen to be different to teachers of other subjects. This study investigates actual classroom practices of language teaching and other subjects and comes up with five factors. The five factors that distinguish the experience of foreign language teachers from that of teachers of other subjects are proposed as follows:

1. *The nature of the subject matter itself.* FL teaching is the only subject where effective instruction requires the teacher to use a medium the students do not yet understand. This reality is rooted in the subject matter of foreign language itself. In foreign language teaching, the content and the process for learning the content are the same. In other words, in foreign language teaching the medium is the message.
2. *The interaction patterns necessary to provide instruction.* Effective FL instruction requires interaction patterns such as group work which are desirable, but not necessary for effective instruction in other subjects.
3. *The challenge for teachers of increasing their knowledge of the subject.* Language teachers teach communication, not facts. In other subjects, teachers can increase their subject matter knowledge through books, but it is harder for FL teachers to maintain and increase their knowledge of the FL because doing so requires regular opportunities for them to engage in FL communication.
4. *Isolation.* FL teachers experience more than teachers of other subjects feelings of isolation resulting from the absence of colleagues teaching the same subject.
5. *The need for outside support for learning the subject.* For effective instruction, FL teachers must seek ways of providing extracurricular activities through which naturalistic learning environments can be created. Such activities are less of a necessity in other subjects. No empirical support is provided for the above claims, and I highlight them here not to argue for their validity but as an example (and a rare one it would seem) of the manner in which language teachers' distinctive characteristics have been conceptualized.

In conclusion, language teachers have unique characteristics, so they require specialized skills and professional development in order to create pleasant atmosphere in class, making students feel like coming to class.

## CONTENTS FOR LANGUAGE TEACHER DEVELOPMENT

In order to reach the goal of successful language teaching, professional development is needed in the “tools” of the teaching profession in terms of theory, curriculum design, methods, materials, classroom management, activities, curriculum, evaluation, etc.

### Teaching Skills And Classroom Management

According to Gebhard (2005, p.69), classroom management refers to the way teachers organize what goes on in the classroom. Teachers are seen as the most powerful persons who have the authority to influence the kind of interaction that goes on in the class, and this interaction is created from a combination of many related factors. The goal of classroom management is to create a classroom atmosphere conducive to interacting in English in meaningful ways to make students have progress in learning English. Therefore, good managerial skills are an essential component of good teacher. Richards (2002, p.14) asserts that “in a well-managed class, discipline problems are few, and learners are actively engaged in learning tasks and activities; this contributes to high motivation and expectations for success.” The concept of effective teaching can be determined from the teacher's behavior, the learner's behavior, classroom interaction.

### Teaching Materials

Basically, materials used in EFL/ESL classrooms are created by four groups of people. These include publishing companies, government agencies, curriculum development teams at the school level, and classroom

teachers. According to Gebhard (2005), materials can be commercial materials including texts, audiotapes, and computer program. They can also be materials produced by a government education agency or committee and material produced by teachers who have EFL/ESL teaching experience.

### **Language Culture**

Culture refers to the common values and beliefs of a people and the behaviors that reflect them. Gebhard (2005) suggests that teachers can teach concepts that not only can bring about appreciation for people and culture but also can be useful for students when they are placed in cross-cultural communication situations. Teachers should be knowledgeable about processes to help students develop their own experience with the cultural environments of the language they are learning.

### **Technology For Language Learning**

In recent years, foreign-language teachers have been presented with an increasingly large array of “multimedia” tools to enhance their teaching. These include audiotapes, video packages, and computer programs. Moreover, language labs have been used as language learning centers in all levels of education. Furstenburg & Morgenstern (1992) assert that the future of technology in the foreign-language field is inseparable from a certain number of other larger issues, such as theories of language acquisition, the role of technology in the teaching and learning process, the role of teacher, and the recognition given to language teaching.

### **Language Testing And Assessment**

Language tests play a powerful role in many people’s lives in education, employment, and in moving from one country to another. Language teachers usually get involved with language test in two ways. First, they have to prepare tests for students on particular courses. It is necessary for them to develop a critical understanding of the principles and practice of language assessment as they are actually responsible for language test development. Second, if you are conducting research in language study, you may need to have measures of the language proficiency of your subjects. For this, you need either to choose an appropriate existing language test or design your own. (McNamara, 2000)

### **Curriculum Design**

Curriculum design is concerned with the choice and sequencing of instructional content. The procedures for developing a syllabus or curriculum involve examining instructional objectives and arranging them by priorities, and then determining what kind of content is required to attain the objectives. According to Richards (2002), conceptions of the nature of a curriculum are closely related to the view of language learning. Under the impact of grammar-based views of the nature of language, language curriculum is expressed in terms of grammar, sentence patterns, and vocabulary. However, when based on communicative theories, curriculum tends to be expressed more in communicative terms. For language curriculum development, Richards also suggests processes comprising needs analysis, goal setting, syllabus design, methodology, and testing and evaluation.

### **Teaching Methodology, Approaches, And Strategies**

After the goals, objectives, and content of a language program have been determined, decisions about methodology can be taken up in detail. Methodology can be characterized as the activities, tasks, and learning experiences selected by the teacher in order to achieve learning, and how these are used within the teaching/learning process. Strategies are usually defined as approaches that can be used across curricular areas to support the learning of students.

### **Language Skills**

There is general agreement that teachers need to be competent in four language skills (listening, reading, speaking, writing) in order to help students develop their English skill successful. So, it is necessary for teachers to

meet English proficiency requirement. In other words, apart from a good teaching qualification, teachers need to have good English ability. Teachers with the required language proficiency and a specialist ELT teaching qualification will have more chance of getting results in the classroom.

### **Teaching Activities**

To manage and promote interactive classrooms, a variety of activities can be used. An activity is described as a task that has been selected to attain the instructional goals. For example, an activity may focus on a specific area of language such as developing particular skills or practicing an item of grammar, a feature of pronunciation, or vocabulary, or the activity may encourage the integrated use of a variety of aspects of language. Therefore, the chosen activity might have a link with classroom management in many different types such as alone, in dyads, and in small groups, or as a whole class. These arrangements provide more choices of activities for students in class. Learning activities vary in their goals (Gebhard, 2005, p.69). The concept of effective teaching can be determined from the teacher's behavior, the learner's behavior, classroom interaction.

### **Psychology In Language Teaching**

We cannot deny that psychology is not relevant to language teaching. When teachers speak of 'language capability,' they might need to consider some factors related to that. These include differences in memory, perception, thought or differences in personality features relating to communication. It is important to take into account individual peculiarities of temperament, character, etc. and ensure a differential approach to learner in foreign language class situations.

### **METHODS OF PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT**

Effective teaching comes from a capable and active teacher who is engaged in exploring his or her own teaching development through different ways. Richards & Renandaya (2002) suggest that teachers' professional interests and needs may change over time. As they progress in their careers, they should also seek out different professional development methods. For example, young teachers may initially be concerned with what-to-teach questions. However, as they gain more experience, they should be more interested in the principles that underline the various teaching techniques and activities. Many professional development activities are in-service courses, classroom research, seminars, etc.

Ur (2002) states that the professional community of English teachers has developed means of consolidating relationships between its members and created opportunities for them to benefit from each other's knowledge. It holds courses and conferences: locally, nationally, and internationally (TESOL). Also, it sets up organs through which members can exchange ideas and publish innovations such as journals, newsletters, Internet sites etc. He also adds that teachers can prepare themselves to do a competent job through learning. This learning may take the form of pre-service or in-service courses, reflection on experience, reading, observation, discussion with colleagues, writing research.

A number of methods of teacher development have been proposed and implemented. Lieberman (1996) identifies four settings in which learning occurs:

1. Direct teaching (through, for example, conferences, courses, workshops, consultations)
2. Learning in school (through for example, peer coaching, critical friends, quality review, appraisal, action research, portfolio assessment, working on tasks together)
3. Learning out of school (through, for example, reform networks, school-university partnerships, professional development centres, subject networks and informal groups)
4. Learning in the classroom (through, for example, student response)

Wichadee (2009) suggests six ways of professional development that EFL teachers in Thailand always use to enhance their quality as follows:

**Self-Monitoring**

Not only the classroom practices of language teachers are of interest to many people outside, but teachers themselves are also paying a lot of attention to what they do in classrooms. Being a systematic approach to the observation, evaluation, and management of teachers' own behaviors, self-monitoring provides an opportunity for teachers to reflect critically on their teaching. It enables them to arrive at their own judgments as to what works and what does not work in their classroom. In other words, self-monitoring is seen as a component of teachers' ongoing professional development. According to Richards (1994), there are three major ways available to self-monitoring in teaching. These are personal reflection (diary), self-reporting, and audio or video recordings of a lesson which provide a record of what actually happens in classroom. Therefore, teachers can use it for a regular observation of their own teaching.

**Individual Reading & Reading Groups**

Another easy way to learn includes reading internet materials and journals as well as actual books. After reading is done individually, what is learnt can be formalized in discussion in a reading group. Teachers can set a text to read and come together with colleagues a few weeks later to discuss its content. Everything can be learnt through sharing of impressions and discussing issues the reading material raises.

**Training Course And Seminar**

Good & Brophy (1997) state that the most fundamental factor making it difficult for teachers to assess classroom behaviors is that most of them happen so rapidly. This problem can be solved in part through training. In other words, training can make them become more aware of their classroom behaviors. Therefore, teachers should be occasionally introduced to new theory and practice of teaching as this will give them an opportunity to reframe the ways in which they reflect upon their own teaching and also provide them with more satisfactory performance in class. That is, instructors may need set-aside time for learning and time to experience or digest new ideas. Strevens (1992) strongly agrees that the general effectiveness of language learning and teaching in any given country is heavily dependent on the nature and quality of the training which teachers undergo before and after entering their profession.

There are two reasons why newly acquired methods do not transfer easily to the teachers' classrooms. Teachers are not only inexperienced setting up and handling the new teaching activities but they also lack the specialist English to do so confidently. As we know well that activities will provide a meaningful context for the learning and practice of the classroom language, the teachers who pass the training course can perform the language and methodology more confidently. Thus, the best way to help teachers gain more techniques of teaching is to provide them with a training course and seminar where they can gain more knowledge and share ideas with one another.

Teacher-training courses come in many shapes and sizes such as in-service, pre-service, short/long, visiting expert. However, there seem to be some elements which can be considered essential in any such course. These elements are the specific purpose of the teacher-training course and local circumstances or constraints. The course should be designed so that trainees can learn new methods and back in their own classrooms. In brief, non-native teachers should not be expected to be able to handle classroom English without any special training. It is even more difficult for those who have never been exposed to English-medium teaching themselves. (Roberts, 1998)

In Thailand, we have seen much potential teacher development in universities. They provide many effective professional development programs for their own faculty members and others from different universities. For example, EFL/ESL teachers get together through seminars to exchange ideas, experiences, and to discuss their teaching difficulties. They help each other to solve these problems. So, the most effective cure for teacher anxiety and depression is to find the cause and take some positive actions to remove it. At this point, teachers have been trained to analyze the cause of the problems and ways to solve them. This enables them to realize the role they are playing, to become aware of the approach they are using, and to do their best to improve their teaching process.

## **Classroom Observation**

Observation, according to Montgomery (1999) is the act or practice of noting and recording facts and events as they happen in order to see what occurs in the classroom. Traditionally, classroom observation has been done by most supervisors who sit in a lesson and compile a list of corrective points where improvement is needed. Although the main purpose to visit classrooms is to evaluate teaching, we can apply this idea to other benefits. To observe other teachers is a way which provides teachers with awareness of their own teaching. This means they can see their own teaching in the teaching of others, and they also observe others to gain self-knowledge. In other words, they will have a chance to reconstruct their own knowledge. It is dangerous if the teachers are unaware of their behaviors in classroom. For example, they devote time to subjects partly on the basis of their attitudes. They may enjoy teaching reading more than writing. Sometimes, they tend to call more frequently on students they believe to be the most capable. They may show little positive support and encouragement when their students are constructive. These behaviors are said to have effects on the students in learning English. In other words, teachers' lack of awareness about their behavior certainly lessens their classroom effectiveness.

Good & Brophy (1997: 23-55) proposes many different ways of observing in classrooms. Some observers will be able to focus on six behaviors; others may be able to code ten. Some may be in the classroom eight hours a week, some may remain only four. Some may see two or three different teachers; others will be in the same room. No matter what situational differences are, we still hold on some general principles when we observe in classrooms. First, observers should try to reduce the bias in viewing teacher behavior by examining both teacher and student behaviors. Students influence teachers as much as teachers influence students. However, we cannot refuse that the key to thorough classroom observation is based on student response. For example, some students are actively engaged in worthwhile learning activities even though the teacher is lecturing. Meanwhile they may not pay much attention to the lesson when the teacher is using discovery technique or using small- group activity. Second, observers should be careful not to disturb the natural behavior in the classroom. Natural means the behavior that would take place in the classroom if the observers were not present. It's better for the teacher to explain the observer's presence briefly so that students do not have to wonder about the observer. Observers will refuse to participate in conversations or aid them in the seatwork. Third, before coming to a classroom, observers should talk with the teacher about where they will sit in the room, how they should be introduced to the students, and how they should respond when a student approaches them. Finally, observers need to prepare the way they use to observe beforehand. The followings are two sample checklists for general and specific observation.

## **Conducting Action Research**

It's now accepted that teachers can develop their professionalism through conducting research in their own classroom. Knowledge gained from this type of research can be very rewarding, as teachers can develop a deeper understanding of what goes on in their classroom which in turn can become the basis for improving their instructional practices. The major stages of carrying out an action research study include generating a meaningful research question, finding out what other people have found out about the topic of our investigation, collecting, analyzing, and interpreting the data, and reporting the results. Teachers might start with a small, achievable project, preferably one that deals with the most relevant classroom issues, such as how to increase student participation in class, or how to get students motivated to read extensively. After gaining experience and confidence, teachers may move on with a more complicated research project.

## **Giving Sessions**

This can range from a small in-school meeting where teaching ideas are shared right through to a session at a large international conference. All conference speakers start with an interesting issue, and all teachers have something to say. Discussion and feedback can provoke the participants well. This is a particularly effective way to develop oneself.

## **CONCLUSION**

As professional development is playing a significant role in teaching job, it should be accepted and conducted frequently by faculty members for the sake of higher quality of the institutions. However, most of them

are not available to join those programs as they are fixed with their teaching schedules. Indeed, teachers themselves often feel guilty and uncomfortable about being away from their classrooms for restructuring or self-development activities. They know that administrators view unfavorably anything that draws teachers away from direct engagement with students. To solve this problem, the administrators should provide an opportunity for the teachers to write any projects of professional development by themselves in order to suit their needs. Some teachers might need a good plan for identifying relevant development opportunities that will be most relevant for their personal and professional goals. It is a good approach to keep their development constant, evolving and on track. In addition, teachers should have a chance to choose the content or the method on their own so that they will put things they have learned into implementation directly and effectively. For instance, if the teachers are concerned with the contents of teaching material or language skills and linguistics the most, or if training/workshops are considered the most effective, they should be provided with these things continuously. Therefore, teachers should be concerned about abilities necessary for a career, and these abilities should be developed from the start. Finally, let me emphasize that there is no single method of development that works well with everyone. An effective method is the one that can direct learning about teaching, meets the teacher's needs, and suits the teaching context.

### **AUTHOR INFORMATION**

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**NOTES**