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Continuous Professional Development for ESL Teachers of Professional Courses

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Abstract

CPD is a lifelong learning approach to planning, managing and benefiting from one's own development. Among the several models that CPD offers to language teachers, Collaborative Action Research is found to be extremely useful in the Indian context of teaching ESP courses. This paper elaborates on the benefits of Action Research apart from tracing out the other means of CPD available to teachers in the field.

Key Words: CPD, ELT, ESL, CAR

Objectives of the Paper

The primary objective of this paper is to show how action research can become an effective CPD model of ESL teacher development in the context of teaching English to the engineering students. Secondly, it tries to explore some of the channels of CPD for ESL teachers to benefit from.

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ESL Teacher Development

According to Roy, Continuous professional development (CPD) is a systematic maintenance, improvement and broadening of knowledge and skill, and the development of personal qualities necessary for the execution of professional and technical duties throughout the working life (Roy Edward, 2010: 64). Although Teacher development has been a familiar notion in the English language teaching (ELT) profession for the last few decades, it is still relatively new and has received insufficient attention (Huimin Zhu 2010: 60). For example, until the advent of globalization, there has not been much work done in the field of teacher education and development in India and other Asian countries. Hence, a systematic focus on various aspects of professional development is necessary. To achieve this, a continual and constant interaction among the teachers across the globe needs to be made essential, which is the chief objective of CPD.

Need for CPD

The advantages of continuous professional development are as follows; CPD maintains and enhances a person's effectiveness as a teacher i.e., it ensures the teacher's competency in the job market, enables them to be committed to their own development and provides them with an opportunity to find new intellectual challenges.

Professional development activities for language teachers range from individual activities, such as teachers' reflecting on their teaching activities, updating their knowledge by reading academic journals and books, and attending academic conferences, to collaborative activities like teachers, discussing their problems, sharing ideas with their peer groups and collaborating with other teachers in classroom action research or other professional projects. In fact, teacher development should include pre-service teacher training as well as in- service training. Pre- service training helps the teachers improve their language as well as specific teaching skills. In service training programme makes them participate in CPD activities mentioned above and thus help the ELT teachers to be more innovative and creative in their classrooms.

Here are some effective channels of CPD for ESL teacher development. These channels facilitate teachers working in different locales come together and share their ideas and problems of teaching and learning in order to get plausible solutions for their context specific problems.

SIGs in ELT

SIGs are special interest groups who keep working on certain aspects of language teaching and learning like teaching methods, material development, testing, evaluation etc. They promote interaction among teacher community and enhance their professional competence. There are many special interest groups found on the internet and teachers can join the ones which interest them. For example, teachers can join SIGs such as International English Education Research Association (IEERA), TEA-SIG and the like.

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Joining Professional Bodies and Subscribing and Contributing to International and National Journals

Professional bodies like ELTAI and IATEFL play a key role in the progress of language teachers. They pave way for sharing expert knowledge. Teachers can update themselves by reading the articles, reviews in International and National journals. They can adapt these methods and materials for their classroom use. Subsequently, they can share their ideas and experiences emerging out of their research with a wider teacher community.

Other Significant Means of CPD

There are various ELT forums on virtual world, which encourage teachers to participate in a variety of ELT topics. Some of them are TESL, TEFL, TESOL, ESL, EFL, ESOL etc. Exposure to expert lectures in seminars and conferences always guide the young and the experienced teachers to experiment with new and innovative strategies in their classrooms.

Reading in groups and online are other significant means of CPD. Though reading is an individual activity, reading in groups provides an opportunity for the teachers to formalize everything they read and discuss. All these and many more models of CPD enable the language teacher communities to work collaboratively. Thus, they benefit immensely from the sharing of their impressions and perspectives on the teaching learning process.

Action Research and ESL Teaching

There is an attempt in this paper to show that it is essential for ESL teachers working on ESP courses (B.Tech. and MBA) to constantly engage themselves in curriculum research and development. The reasons for this are stated below.

Economic globalization has changed the direction of teaching English in Asian countries in general and India in particular. ELT in India has begun to address the needs and demands of a wide variety of learners across the country. The chief of them are the students who pursue the course of engineering and technology and business management. Recent statistics reveals that India produces about six lacks of engineering graduates every year and one third of them are from Andhra Pradesh state alone. Among the state universities, Jawaharlal Nehru Technological University (JNTU) has more than 1000 colleges across the state catering for engineering education, and sixty percent of them are located in urban and semi urban areas. The intake in these colleges comprises of students who belong to both urban and rural areas. In the four- year graduate course, English is the medium of instruction. Apart from this, a communicative course in English is mandatory for the students in first and third year programmes. It is imperative that the students, despite their medium of instruction being a regional language throughout their secondary school education, have to pursue their engineering education in English alone.

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Hence, it is indeed a challenging task for ESL teachers to impart necessary language skills to the learners for academic purposes and for employability.

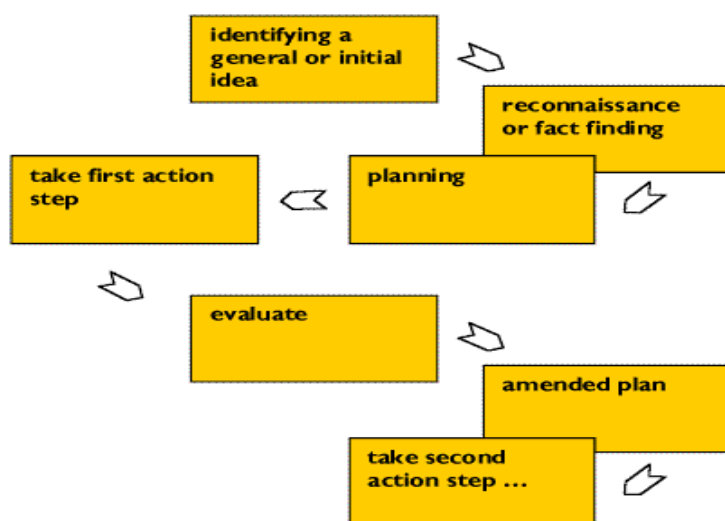
The sophisticated teaching methods and materials which are available through multinational publishing houses such as CUP, OUP, Orient Black Swan, etc, are mostly beyond the cognizance of the average Indian teacher and learner who are culturally, socially and economically placed in a different context and locale from the west. Therefore, ESL teachers in India have to work together in order to develop more Indianised/indigenous teaching techniques and context specific materials. Perhaps, the teachers can increase their efficacy by following different models offered by CPD. One such model discussed in this paper is collaborative action research, which is proved to be essentially beneficial to the teachers and the students of first year B.Tech. in Hyderabad, India.

Collaborative Action Research

Action research is a teacher conducted classroom research basically to resolve practical teaching problems. The word action refers to practical work taken up, to solve issues and problems related to teaching and learning in a systematic approach of investigations and information collection (research). Action research is a time- bound, collaborative classroom activity involving the cycles of observing, analysing, acting and reviewing. Through these processes, teachers can develop deeper perception of several issues of teaching and learning and acquire useful skills of investigation and problem solving. Hence, CAR is viewed as an important model of CPD.

There are a lot of models of Action research followed across the globe. The following is one such model representing the systematic steps involved in Action research made by Kemmis and McTaggart (1982).

Figure 1



Action Research and Reflective Teaching

One of the key components of teacher development is teachers' reflecting on their own teaching. Self-enquiry and critical thinking can help teachers move from the basic level of teaching by impulse and intuition, to a level of planned research. Reflective teaching is teacher's spontaneous and informal reflection on classroom events but it leads to action research when the teacher shares these events (problems and issues) and deliberates on their experiences and ideas with their peer group in an organized way. Thus, the practicing teachers become teacher-researchers and conduct collaborative research. Nevertheless, they are freed from established theory and techniques and therefore are able to construct a new theory to fit the given situation.

Benefits of Action Research

Here are some instances where teachers are benefited from action research.

In the first year- B. tech. classes, initially, the English teachers found it difficult to deal with learner problems such as shyness, low self- esteem and the fear of ridicule. They discussed the problems, and tried out many ice-breaking activities to bring the heterogeneous groups together. After several such activities the teachers worked on their experiences and feedback in systematic steps and procedures. Further, they could revise and modify the activities until they became result oriented.

Similarly, while teaching pronunciation - Intonation and Rhythm in English to the same group of students, the teachers have observed that a bilingual model is more suitable than the native speaker model. First, the students' attention is drawn to the stress pattern in their first language and they are helped to identify the differences between the syllable-timed rhythm in their first language and stress- timed rhythm in the target language. It is discovered that the students are able to appreciate better when parallel sentences from the learners' first language and second language are taken as examples to teach word stress and sentence stress. Moreover, their apprehensions of using RP are eliminated when emphasis is placed on the intelligibility within their own communities.

Another interesting finding emerged from the teachers' collaborative work is related to teaching group discussion/debate in a third year class.

Students, who come from rural and semi-urban regions especially, feel more comfortable to discuss topics related to their own identities and culture i.e. local festivals, traditions, literature etc. than the topics of their prescribed text book which are generally of global issues. Even the shy and less able learners tend to come forward to contribute to the discussion. The teachers after comparing the feedback from their activities have concluded that the choice of local cultural content has sustained the learners' interest in the speaking activities. Similarly, in the audio-visual lab classes, the teachers who started using extracts from English films with dialogues dubbed in the learners' first language have discovered that translation is a powerful tool to enable the students appreciate the

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other cultures as well. In this way, teachers are encouraged to try out a process syllabus than being stuck with a pre-designed syllabus.

Hence, a systematic classroom research provides the language teachers not only with necessary techniques but a lot of confidence and enthusiasm to handle large heterogeneous classes. It finally leads to teachers actively constructing workable theories of teaching in relation to their specific teaching contexts as discussed in the cases above.

Thus, collaborative action research as opined by Anne Burns (2010), leads to regular interactions between teachers and students and gradually bridges the gap between them. It involves teachers to examine closely their own classroom practices and their students' ability to understand what is being taught. Based on the feedback given by the students, appropriate decisions will be taken to cater to the learning needs of the students. It can also groom the teachers to prepare a need based syllabus and train the learners accordingly.

Most importantly, action research means disseminating ideas about teaching and learning, which usually remain personal and confined to one's own experiences. When these experiences become an open channel to a wider audience, every staffroom can be a platform for thought provoking sessions on the issues of their classroom. Teachers can have an opportunity to discuss their ideas and activities collectively. This kind of self reflection and exploration always stimulates a teacher to learn, work, research and share more with their co-teacher-researchers and students. It can contribute to the effective teaching and learning process and professional and personal development of the teachers in any educational setting.

Conclusion

Thus, CPD paves way for collaborative action research through which teachers could enrich personally and professionally. This new dynamics of teaching and learning has emphasized more openness, flexibility, creativity and commitment on the part of the English language teachers who collectively facilitate this constant process of evolution.

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