

Integrating Futuristic Skills: Domains of Critical Importance for Professional Upskilling of ESL Teachers in the 21st century

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Abstract

Continuous professional development is the ability of professionals to evolve and develop their knowledge and skills through self-reflection and a proactive engagement with the upskilling industry. It contains three components, namely, coaching, collaboration and assessment. The higher education sector offers numerous avenues or opportunities for continuous professional development of ESL teachers. However, educators need to identify and incorporate areas of critical importance where teachers require self-development and institutional backup. The present study outlines four focus domains crucial for the continuous professional development of ESL teachers. They are Expansion of cognitive knowledge, Reflective practices, Critical Thinking skills and Digital and Technological skills. Expansion of knowledge base of teachers can be achieved by subscribing to courses and certifications as well as by improving teacher cognition. Reflective practices refer to introspective adaptations and self-corrections incorporated by teachers into their classroom process. Documentation, Collaboration, Teacher Toolbox or Artifacts of Practice can be used for reflective practices of ESL teachers. Critical thinking skills include Open mindedness, Identification of prejudices and biases, Research and analytical skills and Problem solving. Digital and technological skills include exploration of the internet, use of Artificial Intelligence in the classroom, use of presentational gadgets like projectors or smart board and facility with various digital learning platforms, software and apps. ESL teachers need to upgrade their knowledge and skills in these focus domains so that they can manage the challenges of the modern educational landscape more effectively.

Introduction

Transformation and development are two keywords that foster institutional growth and a healthy workplace culture. The term continuous professional development is a catch phrase in various organisations and educational institutions today because professional development ensures commitment, dedication, reflection and growth.

Continuous professional development (CPD) can be defined as the ability of professionals to evolve and sharpen their knowledge, skills and performance through self-reflection and a proactive engagement with the upskilling industry. CPD for teachers means development of pedagogical competencies and skills as well as administrative leadership with a futuristic vision for the betterment of classroom goals and processes. It is a continuous and sustainable process for teachers to realise their long-term goals of teaching.

OECD (2009) defines CPD as activities that develop a teacher's knowledge, skills, expertise and other characteristics. Darling-Hammond et al. (2017) outlines effective CPD as bettering teacher practices and student outcomes. Scher and O' Reilly (2009) describes CPD as including immediate outcomes regarding teacher's knowledge, beliefs as well as teacher instruction and long-term outcomes regarding learner achievement.

The previous studies about CPD focus on various strategies that can be adopted for professional development programmes. (Walshe and Driver 2019; Wetzal et al. 2019; Becker et al. 2019) Some other studies like those by Thomson et al. 2019 or Dirk et al. 2019 focus on the learning outcomes of CPD programmes. Becker et al. upholds teaching basic skills and transmitting traditions of successful teaching as the goal of CPD. Ploeger et al. 2019 aims at developing analytical competence of teachers. Xu and Ko 2019 look at CPD as advances in self-regulated learning agreeing to the standards of Communities of Practice. They found that the CPD strategies are more collaborative and use a collegial learning environment.

CPD consists of three components- coaching, collaboration and assessment. Coaching refers to transmission of a skill or pedagogical model by a trained expert to the recipient community. Collaboration refers to sharing of knowledge and skills acquired from or with the Community of Practices or peers. Assessment refers to the feedback we gather from various stakeholders. It can be formative assessment or summative assessment or both. Kennedy in 2005 proposed nine CPD models consisting of transmission models, transitional models and transformative models.

Need and Importance of CPD

Evolutions in the technological sector and society have brought about a sea change in the educational goals and educational processes. New skills and technologies are getting accepted and the traditional or formal skill sets are becoming outdated. Teacher educators need to update and implement novel skills and competencies in order to revamp and modernise the teaching profession and do justice to the society.

CPD is an empowering process. It equips teachers with the latest developments and reinforces their skills and competencies. It reorients the pedagogical perceptions and enables teachers to acquire latest skills and techniques in order to manage the hyperconnected knowledge environment. CPD enables educational prospecting by integrating digital and technological advances as well as new domains of knowledge with construction of curriculum and classroom practices.

Srinivasacharlu (2019) has enlisted the programmes and activities that facilitate CPD for tertiary level teachers. They include observational learning at the institutional level, subscribing to content courses, attending seminars, conferences or workshops, participating in orientation or refresher courses, undertaking research and post research works as well as action research. Funded projects, membership in professional organisations, publishing etc. also help in CPD. Just as there is an individual requirement to identify upskilling needs, there is also an industrial and institutional requirement to identify domains of critical importance for designing and implementing CPD.

Domains of critical importance for CPD

The present study delineates four focus domains crucial for the CPD of ESL teachers. They are the knowledge level of teachers, Reflective practices, Critical thinking skills and Digital and Technological skills. The prime focus is on expanding the knowledge base of teachers through content updating, skill acquisition and trained strategies. This paper advocates a comprehensive cognitive development that incorporates current linguistic theories, pedagogical strategies and cultural nuances to equip ESL teachers with a solid, updated foundation. Similarly, Reflective practices of a teacher promotes self-awareness and a thoughtful examination of teaching methodologies. Teachers should develop and disseminate critical thinking skills in order to apply analytical thought and independent reasoning into academics. As digital and technological landscape is expanding and gaining greater importance in education, this paper underscores the importance of acquiring digital and technological skills for an ESL teacher. This multi-faceted framework will help educationists design effective CPD programmes that align with the diverse needs of ESL teachers.

1. Continuous expansion of knowledge base

CPD for ESL teachers envisage the development of language teaching capabilities and expertise by acquiring knowledge of teaching methodologies, strategies, model classroom practices, implementational difficulties and solutions. It also entails expanding professional credentials by attending content specific webinars, MOOCs etc. or by acquiring micro credentials like facility with podcast techniques, improvement of fluency or accuracy of pronunciation etc. Acquiring academic and teacher training certifications will also add to these credentials. Attending conferences or seminars can enable peer networking and sharing of ideas. The classroom strategies for self-development like observation, critical reflective practices, flipped learning and action research also come under the purview of CPD. Reflective and critical engagement with ideas and experiences as well as collaborative mentoring are also crucial to professional development. ESL teachers should explore all the three different approaches to achieve CPD. The individual approach led by self-learning and career ambitions, the institutional approach led by extrinsic training programmes and

teacher approach led by proactive teacher endeavours should be explored for developing strategies and models for effective language learning. (Mora et al. 2014)

ESL teachers should be informed about the latest trends, methodologies and resources in language learning. They should remain updated on modern methodology of language instruction such as Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), Task based language teaching and Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL).

ESL teachers should pursue language learning courses from reputable platforms and organisations such as TESOL (Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages) International Association, British Council, Cambridge English teacher, Coursera, edX etc. Relevant courses can enhance language proficiency of teachers and can inform teachers about the changes in language standards and linguistic research.

The second aspect of expansion of the knowledge base of ESL teachers is improving teacher cognition. Teacher cognition is a theoretical framework that refers to the cognitive constructs such as thoughts, beliefs and knowledge of ESL teachers regarding their instructional designs and actions. (Borg 2013). For example, a belief system adhered to by several ESL teachers traditionally is that English language learning should facilitate progression in academic studies. This is reflected in the greater importance given to writing accuracy through transcriptions, note making written exams etc. Recently migration has evolved as one of the concerns of ESL acquisition and a shift of focus towards speaking is discernible across different ESL curriculums. Improving teacher cognition among ESL teachers includes revising and improving their beliefs, attitude and knowledge about teaching. CPD workshops on new concepts and best practices, hands on activities and opportunities for teachers to apply new concepts in classrooms, peer observation and constructive feedback from collaborative learning communities, mentoring programmes, Action research etc. are some strategies that can support the development of teacher cognition.

2. Reflective practices

Teachers need to critically evaluate their own teaching process and identify room for improvement in terms of knowledge, skills or strategies. One reflective practice that ESL teachers can adopt is maintaining a teacher's diary. Teachers can document their experiences, challenges and successes in this diary so that they can introspect and reflect upon their own classroom practices. Visual documentation or video graphing of one's classes can also be attempted for future introspection and critical analysis. Collaborative practices like peer observation enable teachers to exchange insights and receive constructive feedback regarding their instructional approaches. Teachers can develop a Teacher Toolbox, a repertoire of effective instructional materials systematically arranged for reference or reuse. For example, a video or a solution triggered by a classroom doubt or Artifacts of practice can add to this repertoire. Artifacts of practice are physical records that capture aspects of the work that happens during class, such as, video of classroom discussions, samples of students' written work and transcript of students' small group problem solving (Goldsmith and Seago 2013).

3. Critical thinking skills

Critical thinking can be defined as the ability to understand, interpret, analyse and evaluate facts and information in order to make logical and conclusive judgements. Critical thinking enables a person to see connections between ideas, sequencing or establishing cause effect relationships. The common critical thinking skills that should be cultivated, applied and disseminated by teachers are

a) Identification of prejudices, biases and lies:

In the post truth era, teachers and learners should develop the ability to distinguish between fact and fiction, real and virtual, true and fake ideas. They should also be able to identify the dominant prejudices and biases that might creep into world views, opinions, philosophy or the learning process itself.

b) Open mindedness

Open mindedness is an attitude that promotes receptivity, logical thinking and inclusion. It can avoid dismissals or animosity and can promote unbiased thinking.

3) Research and Analytical skills

Research is an inquiry into details and facts from credible sources. Analysis is the ability to evaluate information logically in the light of existing or acquired knowledge or experience. Research and analysis are essential for teachers because identification of relevant information and good teaching-learning practices are essential for effective academic work. Research and analysis can enable teachers to find out academic solutions to the problems they face.

d) Problem solving

ESL teachers encounter various problems like individual differences, learning disabilities, communication barriers etc. Developing problem solving skills like analytical thinking, logical conclusions, identification of cause- effect relationships etc. enable teachers to address various problems like, diverse learning needs, classroom dynamics etc. effectively.

4) Digital and Technological skills

The essential digital skills needed for an ESL teacher include digital literacy, mobile digital education and digital design and navigation skills. Teachers should develop the ability to use digital technology effectively for self-development as well as learner development.

Digital skills for an ESL teacher include word processing skills, spreadsheet skills, database skills, electronic presentation skills, web navigation skills, website design skills, email management skills, webCT or blackboard teaching skills, video conferencing skills etc. (Laura Turner 2005). Greg Thompson (2005) identified connecting with social media, getting a head in the cloud etc. as essential digital skills. Digital literacy includes not just a functional understanding of certain software, but a thorough knowledge of various learning, presentation and teaching software and apps that can be utilised for the benefit of learners. Digital upskilling includes developing not only net surfing skills, but also a hands-on facility with various digital platforms, social networking sites, interactional and presentation software as well as cloud navigating skills. CPD should incorporate computational thinking and artificial intelligence. Artificial intelligence can reshape education by reducing the workload of teachers by automating some non-teaching related tasks, enhancing analysis of data and by optimising the learning process on online platforms.

Computational thinking, the e-way to think about solving problems, is widely acknowledged as a basic competency required for the 21st century. (Voogt et al. 2015). The most common strategies used for developing computational skills are problem based, project based, collaborative and game-based learning. Computational thinking includes the same concepts that given our technology dominated world. It consists of decomposing problems, sieving out irrelevant information, identifying patterns and designing a process.

AI can aid in ESL acquisition through speech recognition technology and natural language processing. Language tutoring chatbots can function as tutors beyond the classrooms for eager learners. Gamified language apps can make learning more engaging and AI driven. Virtual reality simulations can provide realistic language scenarios for practice. Teachers can also tailor out learning content using adaptive learning platforms thus addressing individual differences of students. AI can also be used to enable automated assessment and feedback. CPD should enable teachers utilise the personalized, adaptive and interactive nature of AI for effective ESL classes.

Technology demands modern teachers to be functioning in a multidirectional, dynamic manner and attain new levels of knowledge and skills. ESL teachers should develop the capability to synchronise knowledge and development with technological innovations that drive futuristic perspectives or levels.

Conclusion

CPD of ESL teachers is essential in navigating the dynamic landscape of education today. The identified focus domains of expanding cognitive knowledge, embracing reflective practices, fostering critical thinking skills, and digital and technological expertise serve as pillars for the ongoing growth and adaptability of educators. By actively engaging in these areas, teachers not only enhance their own competencies but also contribute to the overall improvement of the ESL teaching profession. The commitment to lifelong learning, coupled with a proactive approach to self-improvement, empowers ESL teachers to stay abreast of emerging trends, integrate innovative teaching methods, and ultimately provide a more enriching and effective learning experience for their students. As the educational landscape continues to evolve, the dedication to CPD can ensure excellence in ESL teaching and preparing students for success in a rapidly changing world.

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