

Professional Development and Reflective Practice as Tools to Improve Teaching Practice

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Abstract

This article presents two topics related with the importance of improving teaching practice, one as a social matter and the second as a personal reflection. With both concepts, teachers have the opportunity to be aware of what is actually happening inside their classrooms in order to make the necessary changes to raise students' performance and acquisition of knowledge. The topic of professional development introduces structural features and core features as characteristics that teachers ought to follow. The topic of reflective practice presents the guided reflection as one option to analyze teaching performance.

Introduction

Language teachers need different abilities and a wide range of knowledge to perform their jobs efficiently, in order to achieve this goal there are diverse tools that should be used. The concept of professional development includes actions related to team work, it proposes that all teachers ought to work together towards the same objectives, and mentions the activities that teachers can follow in order to apply new knowledge inside classrooms. As another way to improve teaching practice, this article also presents the topic of reflective practice as a tool used not for team work, on the contrary as a tool that ought to be used individually, without the social pressure of defending every decision made inside and outside of the classroom.

Keywords: *Professional development, reflection practice, teaching practice.*

Content

Professional Development

Professional development is a concept related to people that are part of the labor force as MacMillan Dictionary states; “professional development is the process of obtaining the skills, qualifications, and experience that allow you to make progress in your career” in this definition, the importance is focused on the professional and his or her achievements that can be reflected on his personal success. In the field of teaching this concept has changed over the years and now has a different meaning, as the New Jersey Department of Education explains “Professional development shall be comprised of

professional learning opportunities aligned with student learning and educator development needs, and school, school district, and/or State improvement goals” in other words, now professional development is concerned not only with teachers’ career progress; it also relies on students’ learning needs and government goals. This means that for a teacher in order to achieve a professional development, he has to consider first his students needs and based on this, he ought to state the following steps that should improve his practice in accordance with pre-stated goals by the school, district and state.

In the field of foreign language teaching there exists a shortage of qualified teachers that are not aware of what they need in order to achieve professional development and consider that having a job and giving a class everyday it is more than enough to obtain what they require to live. According to Curtain and Pesola (1994) foreign language teachers “require a combination of competences and background that may be unprecedented in the preparation of language teachers” this preparation is not easy to achieve. Foreign language teachers ought to possess knowledge about culture, socioeconomic aspects, learning styles and linguistics. They need to have strong language skills, and also to be able to work in teams with content-area teachers, to perform as facilitators of knowledge and more over to be able to work with technology in order to integrate them in their practice. All of these requirements are not a final goal that can be achieved at a certain point in a teacher’s career. It is a process that is constantly changing, since the necessities are not always the same, just as the advances in technology and social factors are not static matters.

New generations of students require different abilities to keep up with the needs that society demands. As Cuban (1990) explains “Teachers are necessary at the center of reform, for they must carry out the demands of high standards in the classroom”. This means that the change has to start with how teachers perform their jobs. Garet et al. (2001) state that “many teachers learnt to teach using a model of teaching and learning that focuses heavily on memorizing facts, without also emphasizing deeper understanding of subject knowledge”. The way teachers learnt is not the same that students learn nowadays, teachers need to support high standards for teaching and learning, in other words, they require to be immersed in the subjects they teach and have the ability both to communicate

basic knowledge and to develop advanced thinking and problem-solving skills among their students.

The Virginia Department of Education (2004) defines “High-quality professional development as several interacting factors. It implies rich content that is specifically chosen to deepen and broaden the knowledge and skills of teachers, principals, administrators, paraprofessionals, and other key education staff”. High-quality professional development’s factors that teachers should follow in order to achieve a development are divided into structural features – characteristics of the design of professional development activities; and core features– dimensions of the substance or core of the professional development experience.

- Structural features

Type of activity. - Traditionally teachers used to assist to “workshops” these are sessions which are outside of their schools, where a leader or leaders with special expertise assist. Workshops are after school, on the weekends or during the summer. Even when these are very common are also strongly criticized for not being effective in providing teachers with sufficient time, activities, and content necessary for increasing teachers’ knowledge and fostering meaningful changes in their classroom practice. Loucks-Horsley, Hewson, Love & Stiles (1998). As an answer to this inefficient kind of activities, the “reform” types of professional development appeared, such as study groups, mentoring and coaching. Opposite to the traditional activities, these take place during the regular school day, during the process of classroom instruction, or during regularly scheduled teacher planning time. By this, reform types create a strong relation with classroom teaching, are easier to sustain over time, have more influence on changing teaching practice and are more responsive to teachers’ goals and needs. Reform activities also include peer observation, coaching, local study groups, and networks for developing specific subject matters.

Duration.- The duration of professional development activities is an important aspect since longer activities represent an opportunity for in-depth discussion of content, student conceptions and misconceptions, and pedagogical strategies. It also allow teachers to try out new practices in the classroom and the opportunity to receive feedback on their teaching. Garet et al (2001)

Collective participation.- Teachers working as a same group brings many advantages such as; having the opportunity to discuss concepts, problems, and experiences that come out during teaching time. Teachers that are from the same school, or area have the possibility to share material and assessments required. The most important aspect of collective participation of teachers in the same school is the development of a professional culture which includes institutional goals, methods, problems and solutions that survive in the school regardless the teachers.

- Core features

Focusing on content. - Most teachers are part of professional development activities, nevertheless, after they receive this information, it is not well known what do they actually learn, it is important that teachers improve their knowledge on subject- matter, and methodology on how students learn. Kennedy (1998) carried out an experiment among teachers who had taken general pedagogy courses and teachers that had taken specific content courses and found out that students of the second teachers had had a better achievement of the subject since they presented a better understanding of these, therefore, it is important that teachers not only take pedagogical courses, instead they take specific courses of how to teach their subject, and a result students can acquire better the information.

Promoting Active Learning. - refers to teachers being engaged in meaningful discussion, planning and practice. Loucks-Horsley, Hewson, Love & Stiles (1998) In order to achieve this, they should observed other teachers and allow being observed to receive feedback from their practice and learn techniques used by other teachers. By learning new techniques teachers can link these with their practice according to their specific background. Another way to promote active learning, teachers ought to analyze students work in order to understand their assumptions, reasoning and solution strategies. This shall allow teachers diagnose students' problems to find proper solutions and design lessons plan that fulfill students' needs.

Fostering coherence. - A common complain among teachers according to Garet et al. (2001) is that the development activities are not connected from one another, this means

that the activities are not part of a coherent program of teacher learning and development. One way to verify if an activity is part of a program, is to check if this is connected with goals and if it is followed up with more advanced work. Another option is to check if the activities are aligned with state, or national frameworks, standards and assessments. The material provided and the guidance received should facilitate teachers' effort to improve teaching practice. The third option to foster coherence is to encourage professional communication among teachers that make the same efforts to improve their practice.

Reflective Practice

In reflective practice, practitioners engage in a continuous cycle of self-observation and self-evaluation in order to understand their own actions and the reactions they prompt in themselves and in learners (Brookfield, 1995; Thiel, 1999) reflexive practice is a concept easy to explain and very difficult to apply. In this practice every teacher has to be honest with themselves, leave a side their egos and reflect on their jobs, their classes, and the improvement of their students. It is difficult to think about that and decided whether to continue with what they have been doing for a long time or to change and try new things that might not be on their comfortable zone, or could not be related with their personality nevertheless could bring better results for their students.

Taking a course, assisting to a congress, or achieving a higher level such as a MA or a PhD are significant achievements that improve curriculums and allow to get a better job or to get a promotion. Nonetheless these achievements do not secure that teachers shall become in better teachers. The change does not come with a title, it comes with the will to change the practices of everyday; as Brookfield (1995) states "to break with the vicious circle" we can use a tool that will help us to reflect and to settle the most suitable path to improve our practice.

The critical reflection is only a part of the process of reflection, this is closely related to the concept of hunting assumptions, and these are the preconceived ideas that we have about the world and how things ought to work. Assumptions as Brookfield (1995) mentions "give meaning and purpose to who we are and what we do" being aware of the implicit assumptions is something that we do not want to find out, we do not want to know

who things really work and the consequences that have. Assumptions can be classified into three categories;

Paradigmatic assumptions. - are the most difficult assumptions to understand. These are related to facts that we assume to be written on stone, we do not realize that are assumptions until someone else points it out, and still we try to find evidence that proves it wrong.

Prescriptive assumptions. - are the ones that we locate at a certain moment; what we think it could be happening in a particular situation, these come from paradigmatic assumptions.

Causal assumptions. - are assumptions about how different parts of the world work and about the conditions under which these can be changed. They are usually stated in predictive terms.

By having this assumptions inside an EFL classroom we assume habits that justify what we do, things that are common sense among teachers, and try to create excuses to avoid the responsibility of our actions.

There are different methods of reflection that can help us to analyze our practice. The one that will be analyzed in this article is the Guided reflection.

Guided Reflection

In 1994, Johns developed the guided reflection, to go from dialogic to critical. This involves engaging with a series of questions that help you to explore and reconsider your motivation or rationale for your actions. Biggs and Tang (2007). These questions help teachers to go into the process of reflection without the need to have someone else making the questions.

The questions can include the goal of the activity, the development of the activity and their consequences. These questions should be made after every class or successful and not very successful activity; in order to prevent making the same mistakes and make classes that are useful to the students. An example of the questions are the following;

1. What was the problem? What went wrong?
2. What was the cause of the problem?
3. How did you deal with the problem?
4. What would you do differently?

All teachers, regardless their free time, or how busy their schedules are, should take a few minutes every day to reflect and be aware of their mistakes, stop blaming the students and make responsibilities of their weaknesses as teachers.

Conclusion

In this assignment the concepts of professional development and reflective practice were analyzed as a result of how teachers should improve their practices. First, in a social context with other teachers that struggle to achieve the same objectives for their students' learning. These actions include, the communication between teachers, the constant teaching training, the relationship between the activities performed in the teaching training and use of these inside the classroom, the information update of the teachers in their area of expertise, promoting active learning and the ones that can be consider the most difficult ones, allow other teachers to observe their classes in order to receive feedback from them and also observe other teachers to make the same.

All these activities can be done, and would not imply that the teacher will actually change his or her practice, nevertheless these help to be aware of his weaknesses, the second concept presented in this article, reflective practice, attempts that each teacher reflects on a more specific moment, or activity that did not come out how it was planned, and gives the opportunity to learn from this and prevent future mistakes.

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