

Continuous Professional Development of ESL Teachers

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Abstract

The task of teaching English as a second language (ESL) is complex, with the cognitive processes behind it is still only partly known. This complexity, along with the diverse roles assigned to ESL teachers, brings several challenges ranging from classroom management to parental expectations. Teachers need systematic support to learn more effective practices to deal with daily challenges, which in turn promote the achievements of students. It is indeed the need of the hour to ensure continuous professional development to equip teachers with a conducive attitude, to update their subject and content knowledge and also to hone their pedagogical skills.

Keywords: Second language learning, ESL, language acquisition, teacher as resource, teacher development, continuous professional development

Learning and acquiring a second language

The task of teaching ESL is not a simple one. The cognitive processes behind second language acquisition are still known to us only in parts, and the classroom conditions and resources are often marked by deficiencies of various kinds. This implied complexity along with the diverse roles assigned to ESL teachers bring several challenges, causing many teachers to be overwhelmed by the number of complex and unfamiliar issues ranging from classroom management to parental expectations. Teachers need systematic support to learn more effective practices to deal with daily challenges, which in turn upgrades the achievements of students.

Second language learning happens when one attempts to study another language (L2) after the acquisition of the first language. A language can only be referred to as L2 if it is attempted after acquiring L1. The acquisition-learning distinction is, perhaps, most to language learning. Among young children, language learning is rather 'natural' and spontaneous, whereas, adults face serious challenges while attempting to attain second language proficiency. An oft-practiced way to develop competence in second language is by conscious learning, which involves the attempt to master the formal knowledge of the language through explicit learning. Some second language theorists have assumed that children acquire, while adults can only learn. Whether acquired or learned, or partly learned and partly acquired, the task of the ESL teacher is no less daunting.

Learning English as a second language

Teaching and learning a language like English, which is currently in active use for everyday communication by millions of people, is very different from teaching or learning a language like Sanskrit or Latin, which is hardly used today for communicative purposes. Learning English as a second or a foreign language is particularly tricky as it is rather hard to keep up with its diversity particularly evident in the different accents, dialects and varieties existing today across the globe. Teaching ESL could also be very

different from teaching English as the first language. When teaching a first language, say, Malayalam to speakers of Malayalam, the focus is more on the literature written in the language, with an additional focus on some remedial teaching where required. But in teaching a second language, even when using a literature-based syllabus, we need to focus more on equipping the learners with basic language skills, and further, making them proficient in them.

The notion that a good user of a language can by default be a good teacher of that language is not always right. Uninitiated 'teachers' are likely to bring their own linguistic prejudices to the ESL classroom, which, in fact, could impede the entire learning process. Language learners are diverse in their learning strategies and styles, and what works for the teacher need not necessarily work for the learner. Therefore, even proficient users of English need a comprehensive orientation in ESL pedagogy to be successful teachers of English.

Teacher as a hindrance

In a language classroom, teacher even proves to be a hindrance to the learning process, when they are not alive to the individual needs of the learners or lack a precise orientation on how to go about with their job. Teachers with prejudices and inadequate practical insights on ESL pedagogy often jeopardise the entire learning process. When they insist on the correct usage of language and its accuracy or reprimand learners for committing mistakes in class, they make the learner shy away from using language freely, thus disrupting the entire learning system. There are people still lamenting, 'If my teacher had supported me more and corrected me less, I would have become a better user of English'.

The teacher factor in ESL classrooms

English language classrooms can be complicated. The teacher is expected to play multiple roles, have considerable linguistic competence, a very good grip over the necessary pedagogic tools and a keen awareness of the autonomy of the individual learners. In a

language class, teacher is a facilitator to many linguists, but the word implies a totally mechanical role. It would be reductive to consider teachers as mere facilitators. Besides, it fails to describe the language teacher appropriately, who should be democratic and favour knowledge construction over knowledge transmission. A language teacher is indeed a teacher, certainly, who facilitates learning, supports the learner emotionally, mentors them, participates in the learning process and above all, remains the most vibrant resource in the classroom.

It is certainly possible to learn a language without the help of a teacher, and the teacher is not the most important person in the room. But having a teacher is very much convenient, particularly when we have large number of learners with varying levels of motivation. Thus, in our practical contexts the presence and role of the teacher is so crucial, that no investment may be spared to empower them to become the most effective tools in the ESL pedagogic process.

Teacher development, the needs

David Crystal's facetious comment that teaching English to speakers of other languages is harder than performing a surgery on the brain has gone viral in YouTube. He has a significant point though, in that apparently lighthearted remark. The real problem lies with the general lack of clarity about the processes involved in acquiring a second language, due to which the present scenario of teaching English in India and in many parts of the world remain largely lacking in effectiveness.

Effective professional development programmes enable and equip teachers to develop the desired skills and knowledge to address the learning challenges faced by their students. Professional development has two aspects: developing teachers' knowledge of the subject and sharpening their pedagogical skills. In-service training or professional development of ESL teachers should be seen as a necessity. Such developmental programmes need comprehensive reforming, restructuring and timely revision according to the changing needs of the day. So, teacher development is a major topic to address,

providing the serving professionals ample opportunities for updating their knowledge and skills towards better performance and advancement in status.

The lack of a systematic ESL training machinery is a major crisis that the ESL scene faces in many contexts. There is no dearth of teacher training programmes of a general nature at primary, secondary and tertiary levels. But the need for specific ESL teacher development programmes should be one of the foremost priorities, as teaching of second language requires specific skills that are often not covered in the blanket training programmes in place now. There is also a marked deficiency of master trainers who could effectively prepare and deliver an ESL training programmes. Often, the training modules are not only ill-conceived, but much is also lost in the delivery. This calls for the concerted and focused attention of stakeholders.

Self-directed professional development, the solution

As we wait for more efficient and ubiquitous ESL training programmes to be in place, there are today different options for equipping oneself to be better teachers of English. It is, in fact, more the onus of the teacher than any other stakeholder to ensure continuous professional development, which has to be self-directed. With the unprecedented developments in information technology, the lack of resources or material is no longer an excuse for teachers. After the successful acquisition of the statutory academic qualifications, young teachers who enter the ESL field either in a school or college, often are under the delusion that they are most equipped for the different aspects of classroom transaction and management. Even in teaching positions where pre-service training is mandatory, such trainings are often observed to be just perfunctory and severely inadequate to prepare the trainees for the actual realities of the classroom they would face on entry into service.

English in the present point in history is marked by great variety and there is no single model that can be considered 'standard'. This necessitates the teachers' familiarity with different 'Englishes'.

Exposing oneself to different dialects, accents and varieties of English, thus, become a significant need among teachers and this can be easily done today by listening to different discourse samples available in video and audio resources in the world wide web. The YouTube itself has emerged as a unique platform where such an exercise is easily possible.

In addition, ESL teachers can ensure their continuous professional development through quality online programmes that are being offered by experienced trainers internationally. No opportunity for professional development, whether it is an e-course (paid or offered free), seminars, faculty development programmes, workshops or refresher programmes, should be missed. It is also very important for teachers to continuously publish the content they create based on their experience and the new insights gained. Though many of these endeavours also fetch points for career advancement, these should be largely seen as being essential and intrinsic to a teacher's professional life.

ESL teachers need also to have the awareness that language learning is not attained through any given curriculum, however well designed. Language learning happens much more through immersion in that language than through grammar books or books on enhancing various language skills. In order to master a second language, one needs to immerse in it through actual use of the target language skills, in contexts. A language teacher is, inevitably, a language learner also. Hence, the immersion model is suitable to the teacher as well, which will in turn cascade down to the learner. And while we wait for more efficient and more frequent teacher development programmes for teaching ESL, we will lose no time and involve ourselves in voluntary continuous self-development endeavours.

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