

English Language Teacher Professional Development: Teacher Educators' Perceptions and Experiences

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With rapid changes and advancements in teaching English language education and the needs of learners, it has become essential for English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers to be updated periodically by enhancing their attitudes, skills, and knowledge through different teacher professional development activities and strategies. English language teachers are required to keep upgrading themselves to help EFL learners acquire English effectively. This research aims to explore EFL teacher educators' perceptions of the importance of teacher professional development and identify their experienced activities for teacher professional development. This research is conducted at a university in Nepal with the participation of eight EFL teacher educators involved in individual interviews. The interpretive research paradigm and case study research method are used for the study. Semi-structured interviews and thematic analysis are used for data collection and analysis. The results show that most of them have positive perceptions towards the importance of EFL professional development and offer suggestions on activities for English proficiency, teaching pedagogy, digital skills, and research skills for teacher professional development that administrators of the university can consult to build skilled teaching professionals who can meet various needs of present learners.

Keywords: EFL teacher educators, teacher professional development, perceptions, experiences, activities, Nepali universities

Introduction

The importance of the English language is widely recognized, especially in EFL settings. The English language has become one of the significant needs for the people of the world in the age of globalization because it is used as a contact language worldwide. However, different people use the English language differently based on their nation. According to Shrestha (2015), English is used as a primary language for both personal and official purposes in countries such as Britain, the USA, Australia, and so on. English is used as a second language for official purposes in some countries such as India, Nigeria, Singapore, etc. Finally, some nations such as Nepal, Japan, Poland, etc. use English as a foreign language.

There is a difference between foreign language learning and second language acquisition. Learning the target language in the context of learners' mother tongue environment is called foreign language learning whereas second language acquisition refers to learning the target language in the context of the target language environment. According to Sharma (2010), people of Nepal who are learning English as a target language in the Nepalese context can be a suitable example of foreign language learning. And obviously, Nepali speakers learning English in Canada or Australia is an example of second language acquisition.

Therefore, in those countries where English is not commonly spoken, the professional development of English teachers is highly important to sustain and enhance the quality of the education provided. Teachers' professional development concerns the growth and development of teachers in their professional roles so that they can perform at their best. Teacher professional development programs enable teachers to use their knowledge and skills effectively and efficiently in their language classrooms. Teacher Professional Development is a long and continuous process that commences from teacher pre-service education until their retirement. Professional

development can be defined as any attempt that increases a teacher's professional knowledge in means of content, pedagogy, and technology. This development can be achieved via various means such as attending conferences or seminars, receiving in-service training, attending workshops, reviewing academic literature, and receiving higher education.

According to Joshi (2012), teacher development includes formal and informal means of helping teachers master new skills, widen their knowledge, and develop an innovative insight into their pedagogy and profession because teacher professional development contributes to their holistic development. Similarly, Sharma and Shrestha (2013) state that teachers acquire knowledge from time to time from different sources in the teaching profession because they face several cases, problems, or projects and need to consult many other useful sources which are the sources of teachers' knowledge in their profession.

A range of activities, whether they are formal or informal, are carried out to develop a teacher intellectually, socially, and professionally. Richards and Farrell (2005) mention eleven strategies that facilitate the professional development of English language teachers. They are workshops, self-monitoring, teacher support groups, keeping a teaching journal, peer observation, teaching portfolios, analyzing critical incidents, case analysis, peer coaching, team teaching, and action research. Formal programs like teacher training, workshops, seminars, etc. are introduced to teachers so that they can familiarize themselves with the innovations in the teaching and learning field. Similarly, teachers are encouraged to intensify the skills and knowledge required in their profession from their perspective (Asmari, 2016). Once teachers realize and understand the real spirit of teacher development, they can focus their activities on developing them professionally. Such teachers take a risk to experiment with new techniques and skills while teaching in the classroom and feel free to learn from other learning opportunities.

The main purpose of the study was to explore EFL teacher educators' perceptions of the importance of teacher professional development and identify their experienced activities for teacher professional development. To achieve this goal, two research questions were formulated. The first question sought to explore how EFL teacher educators perceive the importance of teacher professional development. The second question aimed to identify the types of activities that these educators have encountered in their professional development experiences. By addressing these questions, the study sought to provide insights into the perceptions and experiences of EFL teacher educators in promoting effective teacher professional development.

Literature Review

Teachers from the beginning of their careers face various kinds of students and institutions, which may result in an inevitable struggle to comply with all these challenges. Professional development programs seem to be one of the ways for maintaining a high standard of teaching and retaining a high-quality teaching staff. It is believed that the quality of teachers' learning experience may link to the quality of learners' achievements. English language teachers are required to keep upgrading themselves to help EFL learners acquire English effectively. Teacher Professional Development for teachers in developing countries is an emerging emphasis despite limited resources.

Bharati and Chalise (2017) reported that English language teachers are in the process of getting trained and becoming professional teachers in a relatively sophisticated centrally located town in Nepal. Though it is a positive sign, they are still not fully applying the skills, ideas, techniques, etc. which they acquired in different professional development events in their real teaching-learning settings. Bhatt (2021) mentioned that methods like reading printed materials, Internet and ICT tools, action research, reflection,

and collaboration among teachers are standard for self-directed teacher professional development in a remote part of Nepal. These studies highlight the importance of ongoing professional development for teachers in Nepal. While some teachers are not fully applying their training, others are taking the initiative to engage in self-directed professional development. These findings emphasize the need for continued support and resources for professional development initiatives to ensure that teachers can improve their teaching practices and ultimately enhance student learning outcomes.

Joshi et al., (2018) mentioned that Nepalese EFL teachers have positive experiences with different teacher professional development strategies. The EFL teachers have benefited mostly from self-directed (own teaching experience and self-monitoring), profession-related (workshops, seminars, and conferences), and peer-supported (learning from colleagues) and less benefited from research-focused (case analysis, mentoring, and ELT journals) TPD strategies. They also recommended that there is a need for ongoing TPD activities for EFL teachers in Nepal (Joshi et al., (2018). The study contributes to the literature on TPD strategies in EFL teaching by providing insight into the experiences of Nepalese EFL teachers. The findings of this study may be useful to educational policymakers and TPD program designers in Nepal and other similar contexts.

Nepali EFL teachers do not often seem to find themselves professionally skilled, but they look forward to receiving support either from an institutional or external level. In-service teachers are still not given opportunities for professional development besides some very short training and workshops. For instance, the National Centre for Educational Development (NCED) and the Nepal English Language Teachers' Association (NELTA) conduct in-service training workshops and seminars on different aspects of English language teaching, including teaching methodology, materials development, and assessment. These training and workshops are,

however, questioned against the quality of the teacher trainers and training sessions themselves. Although some EFL teachers attempt to learn something new, they cannot implement the new skills due to the lack of teaching resources and over-loaded teaching hours (Sah, 2015). However, there is high motivation and enthusiasm among new-generation EFL teachers for their professional development. The literature indicates that Nepali EFL teachers require more sustained and effective professional development opportunities. Institutions and external agencies should work towards addressing the existing gaps in training and resources to enable teachers to improve their teaching skills and provide better education to their students.

Meanwhile, Alibakhshi and Dehvari (2015) contended that professional development is the method teachers use to advance themselves. Its significant influence may be seen in raising educational standards in general, as well as helping to improve student learning and teachers' instruction. Mizell (2010) argued that continuing professional development includes both formal and informal activities, such as discussions among coworkers, independent reading, and research, observing coworkers' work, or receiving other learning from peers. Formal activities include conferences, seminars, workshops, collaborative learning among work team members, and courses at colleges or universities. Overall, teacher professional development is a critical strategy for enhancing the quality of education and improving student learning outcomes. Teachers who engage in regular professional development activities, both formal and informal, are more likely to stay updated on new teaching methods, technologies, and trends, and enhance their skills and knowledge.

Chang et al. (2014) showed that language teacher educators, whether professors or education officials, require continuing professional development to meet various demands in a rapidly changing society. They also argued for alternative ways of enhancing

professional learning, which sees professors and education officials as agents of change in their professional development. Gnawali (2015) reported that there is a reciprocal relationship between English language teacher associations and the EFL teachers' professional development. These studies indicate that continuous professional development is essential for language teacher educators and EFL teachers to enhance their skills, knowledge, and competencies. EFL teachers are generally supported in their professional development through different professional development events organized by teacher associations. Such professional development events can provide an effective platform for EFL teachers to engage in continuous professional development activities and stay updated on new teaching methods, technologies, and trends.

Awasthi (2003) stated that the policies of the government related to teacher education and professional development in Nepal are not consistent and effective. As a result, there is a huge gap between the policies and practices regarding teacher education and professional development in the Nepali context. Though there are several provisions for teacher education and professional development, the implementation part of it often becomes less effective and fruitful. The study suggests the need for consistent and effective policies to improve teacher education and professional development in Nepal.

Nugroho et al. (2022) showed two factors affecting the EFL teachers' acknowledgment of the importance of language proficiency PD activities: the need to maintain and improve language proficiency and the benefits of proficiency for teaching and learning. They also recommended that Indonesian EFL teachers develop self-awareness of the importance of improving their skills not only pedagogically but also professionally and realize that PD for language proficiency is imperative to help them keep their professionalism high. This aligns with the call for continuous professional development of language

teachers (Richards & Farrell, 2011) and the recognition that language teachers need to engage in language learning activities themselves to improve their language skills (Freeman & Johnson, 1998). Overall, these studies shed light on the importance of language proficiency for EFL teachers and highlight the need for continuous professional development to improve their language skills.

Gautam (2020) found that English teachers in Nepal attended three kinds of events that include training programs to learn technology, events to learn about the online resources for English language education, and teacher professional development programs to develop their knowledge and teaching skills. Participation in these events made English teachers digitally confident to run the classes online during COVID-19 in Nepal and increased awareness of the integration of online resources in English language teaching. The study provides valuable insights into the role of professional development programs and events in enhancing teachers' digital literacy and promoting the use of online resources in English language teaching.

According to Murray (2010), professional development helps teachers come out of their isolation and enables them to talk about and get rid of any potential annoyance and problems they could experience in their profession. Mahmoudia and Ozkana (2015) argue that teacher professional development provides opportunities for teachers to discover new roles, develop new instructional techniques and methods of teaching, refine their practice, and develop themselves both professionally and personally. Together, these studies suggest that professional development is a critical component of teacher training and education. It can help teachers to improve their instructional techniques, enhance their knowledge and skills, and develop a greater sense of professional satisfaction. Furthermore, professional development can provide teachers with the support and resources they need to succeed in their profession and overcome the challenges they may face.

Silvhiany (2022) reported that teachers relied on attending webinars as one of the ways to do professional development. They also joined the learning communities to discuss innovation in English language teaching, to get teaching materials, to collaborate with other English teachers, and to share ideas about teaching English. Therefore, he argued that there is a need for creating a virtual space for teachers to learn and exchange ideas with other teachers as a form of continuing professional development. The OECD (2009) highlighted some major functions of teacher professional development such as updating and enhancing teachers' attitudes, knowledge, and skills for effective language teaching and learning process. Together, these studies suggest that professional development plays a crucial role in enhancing the quality of language teaching and learning. The studies emphasize the need for continuous training and development opportunities, particularly in virtual learning spaces. These opportunities can provide teachers with the resources they need to stay current and improve their skills, ultimately leading to better learning outcomes for their students.

Despite the growing importance of teacher professional development (PD) in the field of English as a foreign language (EFL) education, there is still a lack of research on the experiences and strategies of EFL teacher educators for effective PD, particularly at the university level. Although some studies have explored the importance of PD for EFL teachers, little is known about the perspectives of EFL teacher educators, who play a crucial role in designing and implementing effective PD programs. Therefore, a gap in the literature exists regarding the experiences and strategies of EFL teacher educators for effective PD, which this study aims to address.

Research Method

The choice of research paradigm and method is a crucial aspect of any research study. In this regard, for my study on teacher

professional development in EFL classrooms in Nepal, I chose to use the interpretive research paradigm and a case study research method. The interpretive research paradigm was chosen based on the research purpose and questions as it assumes that individuals have different perspectives and observe social reality from multiple perspectives (Guba, 1990). Additionally, Cohen and Crabtree (2006) argue that the interpretive research paradigm focuses on individual perceptions, personal constructs, negotiated meaning, and definitions of situations, making it an appropriate approach for exploring teacher educators' experiences and perspectives of professional development in EFL classrooms. Furthermore, as interpretive researchers believe in the reality of people's subjective experiences of the world and the ontology is socially constructed (Taylor & Medina, 2013), this paradigm aligns well to understand the experiences and perspectives of teacher educators in the Nepalese context. To achieve this aim, a case study research method was used as it is a qualitative method of inquiry that enables the in-depth exploration of a particular phenomenon within a specific context. Therefore, the use of an interpretive research paradigm and case study research method in this study allows for an in-depth exploration of teacher educators' experiences and perspectives of professional development in EFL classrooms in Nepal.

Research Site and Participants

I have used a qualitative approach to investigate teachers' perceptions of the importance of EFL teacher professional development. The participants were eight EFL teacher educators from a university in Nepal. They were purposely chosen based on the consideration related to the present research's aims. The criteria employed to select the participants were EFL teachers who had direct experiences of teacher professional development and were open to sharing their thoughts and experiences regarding it. Five participants had teaching experiences of less than ten years while three senior

teachers had taught English for more than ten years. All participants were from the Faculty of Education at a university in Nepal. The participants consisted of six male and two female teachers, with an average age range between 30 to 45 years. All the participants were from the Sudurpaschim province of Nepal.

Research Instruments

The interview guide was used as the research instrument for data collection. The interview was conducted individually with eight EFL teacher educators of the same faculty at a public university in Nepal. The interviews involved semi-structured ones and generally open-ended questions were asked. I gave them a sufficient place to tell their experiences with the phenomenon, recall their experiences, and put their views and perspectives. The language used in this interview is English for this would be easier for them to convey some special terms in this area. The time and place of the interview were set based on the researcher's and participants' convenience. Apart from the interview, I also made field notes during the data collection period though it was not highly systematic, but captured their attitudes and actions which helped me match what they shared in an interview. I also took field notes during the interview process to collect useful data for the study. Similarly, reflective writings and reviewing related literature were used for generating information related to phenomena. A mobile phone was used to record the interview with the permission of the research participants. All the conversations between the researcher and the interviewees are recorded, transcribed, and analyzed into a full text.

Data Analysis

The collected data from interviews were analyzed and proceeded with the following activities: data transcribing, data coding, data condensation, data display, thematizing, and conclusion

drawing and verification. The broad two themes i.e., participants' views on the importance of teacher professional development and their experienced activities for teacher professional development emerged from the analysis of the data.

Results

As the purpose of this study was to explore the perceptions and experiences of EFL teacher educators towards the importance of teacher professional development and supporting activities for teacher professional development, the results were presented in two broad categories i.e., participants' views on the importance of teacher professional development and their experienced activities for supporting teacher professional development.

Importance of Teacher Professional Development

Through the interview, all participants show full awareness of the importance of EFL professional development. Interestingly, in the interviews, the participants shared similar views and ideas in understanding teacher professional development to improve and update their knowledge and skills in teaching and English proficiency. They perceived teacher professional development as a part of their responsibilities as a professional teacher. They viewed professional development as an important activity that they must undergo.

For example, during the interview, participant 2 shared their thoughts on the importance of professional development. With thoughtful expressions on their face, they stated, "Not only can professional development broaden and refresh our knowledge, but it can also enrich and tighten the social aspects of our professionalism." They went on to explain how engaging in professional development activities allows for the sharing of ideas and experiences with colleagues, leading to a deeper understanding of the profession and the ability to collaborate more effectively. It was evident that

Participant 2 believed in the value of professional development not just for individual growth but also for the betterment of the teaching profession. It is also remarkable that some participants view EFL professional development as a necessity for self-improvement, giving themselves more opportunities in their teaching career while others think that EFL professional development is an obvious trend for development.

Similarly, Participant 1 spoke passionately about their views on EFL professional development during the interview. They described it as a golden opportunity to maintain, upgrade, review, and improve their professional knowledge. Their eyes shone with enthusiasm as they emphasized the importance of continuously engaging in professional development activities. For them, it was crucial to keep their teaching practices up-to-date and relevant. As they continued to share their perspective, it was evident that they believed professional development allowed for the exploration of new teaching strategies, methods, and materials that could enhance their students' learning outcomes. The participant stated that professional development was essential for EFL teachers to keep up with the changing trends and demands of the language teaching industry. They added that through EFL professional development, they could expand their knowledge, develop new skills, and gain a better understanding of the language learning process. Participant 1's enthusiasm for EFL professional development was contagious, and it was clear that they were committed to their professional growth and the growth of their students.

During the interview, most of the participants agreed that professional development was necessary to refresh and recharge teachers' pedagogical knowledge and skills. They emphasized that professional development activities enabled teachers to meet the demand of teaching standards. The participants also acknowledged that the professional development activities they had joined generally

dealt with pedagogy-related issues. Participant 3 spoke with conviction, sharing their belief that EFL professional development helped them to learn better ways to teach and engage in the latest trends in teaching. Participant 4 echoed this sentiment, stating that it was important to continue to acquire and update their professional knowledge. They shared that they were afraid of falling behind others in this digital era and felt that professional development was necessary to stay current. It was clear that these participants valued their professional growth and saw professional development to improve their teaching practices and meet the demands of the changing landscape of language education.

Furthermore, some of the participants shared their awareness of the need to stay updated with the latest innovations in their social and academic settings. Participant 5 expressed their commitment to engaging in EFL professional development to meet the increasingly higher standards of learners, schools, and society. They shared that they were always looking for opportunities to upgrade their knowledge and skills to provide better quality education to their students. Similar perspectives were shared by almost all of the participants, highlighting the importance of continuous professional development in the field of EFL teaching. It was evident that the participants recognized the significance of staying current in their profession and were willing to invest time and effort into their professional development to ensure that they could meet the evolving needs of their students and the education system.

Activities to Support Teacher Professional Development

Many activities are recommended for EFL professional development based on the analysis of the results of this study. Generally, they can be put into four main categories: English proficiency, teaching methods, information communication technology, and research.

Activities for Enhancing English Proficiency

During the interviews, most of the participants emphasized

the importance of English proficiency for EFL teachers. They believed that having a high level of English proficiency is essential for building trust with their students and being able to deliver effective lessons. As Participant 1 stated, “English proficiency is the top priority for an English teacher.”

To maintain and improve their English proficiency, participants suggested various strategies. Some participants recommended creating social networking groups, particularly Facebook groups, as a community of practice. These groups would allow teachers to stay connected and practice using English regularly. Participant 2 stated, “We can share our knowledge, and ideas and discuss some issues about teaching, and using English in a Facebook group or any social networking group.”

Others mentioned practising speaking with their colleagues whenever they met on campus. This provided them with an excellent opportunity to use English naturally, which supported enhancing their English language proficiency. Participant 5 shared, “Whenever we have free time, we talk to each other in English. This helps us to enhance our English proficiency, and we can learn from each other.” The participants highlighted the importance of English proficiency for EFL teachers and suggested various strategies to maintain and improve their language proficiency.

Activities for Enhancing Teaching Pedagogy

The participants in the study emphasized the importance of teaching methodology in EFL professional development. According to participants 7 and 8, there are various ways for teachers to exchange ideas about teaching English. They suggested that teachers could attend workshops and seminars where they can have direct discussions with experts in the field. In today’s digital age, teachers can also take advantage of online platforms to learn about the latest teaching strategies and methods while juggling their busy schedules. Additionally, teachers

can share their teaching ideas by conducting class observation sessions. During these sessions, one teacher sits in on another teacher's class and provides feedback, which can promote a sense of belonging among colleagues and sharpen teaching capacity, as noted by participants 4 and 7.

The participants in the study also emphasized the importance of teacher support and collaboration. Participants 3 and 5 noted that conducting class observation sessions can promote a sense of belonging among teachers in the same faculty. Participants 1 and 4 added that this practice can provide teachers with much-needed support from their colleagues. In addition to class observation sessions, participants suggested that teacher support can also be facilitated through informal conversations and mentorship programs. Participant 6 shared their experience of being mentored by a senior colleague, which helped them to improve their teaching skills and build confidence in their profession. The participants in the study acknowledged the importance of teaching methodology and collaboration in EFL professional development.

Activities for Enhancing Digital Skills

Among the activities to support EFL professional development, applying ICT in teaching is mentioned as a 'tool to make the lessons more interesting' (participants 2 and 3). Therefore, teachers should be involved in short courses to learn about how to appeal to students to our lessons by applying information communication technology. They shared how YouTube videos and other online courses can be utilized for enhancing digital competencies among EFL teacher educators. Similarly, they emphasized the role of webinars and other online workshops and training for developing digital skills in EFL teacher educators to effectively integrate ICT in language classrooms. Some participants reported that the academic institutions should 'give financial support so that teachers can have access to this'. (Participants 3 and 6).

Participants 2 and 8 contended that the future generation cannot accept a teacher who is poor at IT skills.

Participants in the study emphasized the importance of using information communication technology (ICT) in EFL teaching to make lessons more engaging. They recommended that teachers attend short courses to learn how to effectively integrate ICT in language classrooms. They also suggested utilizing resources such as YouTube videos, online courses, webinars, and other online workshops to develop digital skills in EFL teacher educators. Some participants highlighted the need for academic institutions to provide financial support for teachers to access these resources. Additionally, some participants stressed that IT skills are becoming increasingly important for EFL teachers to have to effectively teach the future generation.

Activities for Enhancing Research Skills

Despite not being given much attention towards research projects from participants, this activity cannot be missed if teachers expect to improve their teaching-learning performances. Most of them agree that research is a very useful tool for reflecting on and evaluating their performance for improvement. However, a few participants are engaged in action research and are involved in publishing journal articles for their professional development. Therefore, they believe that research is essential to the teaching profession, contributing greatly to their professional development. Participants 2 and 6 suggested that different teacher professional development events should be conducted to develop EFL teacher educators' research skills and motivate them for being continuously involved in research activities for their professional development. Most participants argued that there should be a community where scores of teachers' research and share ideas to keep pace with the constantly changing situation of the teaching-learning environment and society in general.

Participants in the study agreed that research is a valuable tool for improving teaching and learning, but not many are actively engaged in it. Some participants are publishing articles and believe that research is crucial for professional development. Participants suggest that professional development events should be held to improve research skills and motivate teachers to continue researching. They also suggest creating a community where teachers can share ideas and keep up with the constantly changing teaching and learning environment.

Discussions and Conclusions

The results of the research show that all these EFL teacher educators have gained an insightful understanding of the importance of EFL professional development. Most of them have positive perceptions towards the importance of EFL professional development and make suggestions about the supporting activities for teacher professional development that the administrator of the university can consult to build skilled teaching professionals who can meet the various needs of present learners. Their expectations and beliefs towards EFL professional development confirm the previous studies in this area. Teachers' responses to EFL professional development are clear evidence for the administrator of the university to pay more attention to organizing activities so that teachers have more opportunities to develop their professional skills.

Four main categories of professional development activities were identified based on the participants' suggestions. Firstly, teachers were recommended to have adequate English proficiency levels, which could be achieved through small communities where they can interact and learn together. However, it was noted that this may be challenging given teachers' busy work schedules. Secondly, teaching pedagogy was identified as an area of focus, with class observation encouraged among teachers to help them develop their

teaching skills and stay connected with the faculty. In addition, workshops or seminars should be organized more frequently to keep teachers updated with the latest trends in teaching pedagogy. Thirdly, teachers need to be skilled in using IT, given the increasing demand for teaching English in the digital world. Short courses should be provided by universities to equip teachers with the necessary IT skills and boost their confidence in using technology. Finally, the study emphasized the importance of research in professional development and recommended that teacher professional development events be conducted to develop EFL teacher educators' research skills and motivate them to be continuously involved in research activities. Increased research activity can lead to innovative teaching practices that can better meet the needs of learners.

In conclusion, the present study highlights the importance of professional development for EFL teachers and recommends that universities should pay more attention to organizing activities that focus on English proficiency, teaching pedagogy, IT skills, and research. By providing EFL teacher educators opportunities for professional development, universities can better equip their professors to meet asmarilearners' diverse needs and enhance the quality of English language education.

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