

# Perceptions of Women English Language Teachers on Professional Development: A Narrative Inquiry

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## Abstract

*Education is one of the key components of human civilization. Both educated women and men contribute for a better world, therefore, equal opportunity in education is a must. In the case of academia, if teachers, both women and men, develop their professional skills, it will benefit the nation's educational system. This research aimed at exploring the perceptions of women English language teachers on teacher professional development. This study was conducted with purposely selected four women English language teachers teaching at the secondary level in community schools in Rupandehi district. I used interpretive research methodology in this study. I collected data using an interview. In-depth interviews were taken about their personal and professional life-history. Data was transcribed, analysed, categorized and coded to reach the meaning making process. The findings revealed that the participants have good perceptions of teacher professional development. For them, teacher professional development entails upgrading professionalism, learning and sharing the art of teaching through formal and informal TPD platforms, and bringing positive change in students' outcome. The study has implications for policymakers, curriculum developers, syllabus designers, administrators and teacher educators.*

**Keywords:** *Teacher professional development, women English language teachers, training*

## Introduction

I started my teaching career as a woman English language teacher from an institutional school. I was a bachelor's second-year student then. I still recall a lovely July day in 1999 when I and a male classmate of mine were selected out of thirteen candidates and appointed as a primary English language teacher. I was excited to begin my career at an institutional school but was nervous to adjust myself to the English-speaking environment.

However, I was happy to start my career early and continue my higher studies. Although my colleague was promoted to a lower secondary level the next year, I was not. I questioned myself, ‘Am I less capable than him?’ I felt institutional discrimination to me. Fortunately, I passed my bachelor’s degree in 2002, left that school and moved to Kathmandu to pursue further studies at Tribhuvan University. To my great surprise, my colleague who was trusted by the institution for promotion did not pass a bachelor’s degree that year. I completed my master’s degree in 2004 and started teaching at a community campus.

This question often hits my mind: Why are women teachers treated differently than male teachers in the workplace: why are they allocated classes in lower levels i.e. Montessori in comparison to male teachers; are they less capable than male teachers despite having similar qualifications and experience?

However, teachers both women and men, play an important role in shaping a society by educating and producing a variety of manpower who can contribute to the development of a nation. For that both women and men teachers need to be professionally sound. Abakah, et al. (2022) state that governments, educators, and researchers have all recently become increasingly interested in teachers’ professional development (TPD). Phillipson (1992) writes “teachers are made rather than born” (p.14). There are different professional development events and activities that help teachers to be proficient from novice to expert teachers. However, it’s a long-term development. According to Watanabe (2017), development may not happen at once after an interview or attending a seminar. It is a continuous process that encompasses both progression and regression in the teachers’ profession.

Nevertheless, in the case of women teachers in Nepal, they constantly need to be empowered professionally to be top-notch in their profession. For that, they need to go beyond formal training to advance professionally as English language teachers. Their passion and commitment to the field, capacity to devote time to training, attitudes toward TPD providers, their interest in peer education, their experience and practical knowledge, their capacity for independent learning, and their professional aspirations are keys for their professional development as English language teachers (Quadhi & Floyd, 2021). Furthermore, they can learn on their own through self-reflection, mentoring, in-service education, training and many more. Additionally, participation in professional development activities increases the sense of empowerment of women English language teachers. As a result, this further benefits the entire education system of a nation in general and they inspire many other women teachers and girl students in particular.

## Review of Literature

In the context of Nepal, Gnawali (2013) did his PhD dissertation on English language teachers' development through professional associations to explore how teacher associations contribute to the professional development of the teachers who join such associations. The study further explored that TPD was the core of association activities for English language teachers. Teachers learn and grow by means of reciprocity with one another. Furthermore, these professional associations enable them to organize events, write and publish blog writing and provide opportunities with foreign exposure and higher studies. It also explored the contributions that its members make to the associations. However, this study was limited to NELTA as a way for the professional development of English teachers, particularly those who were working as NELTA members. English language teachers also need to enhance professionalism through different types of online forums of professional development i.e. webinars on ELT, teachers' network groups, etc. that are available on the internet locally and globally, especially after COVID-19.

Kshetree and KC (2020) explored gender roles. In the study, they looked at M Ed English courses entitled 'Interdisciplinary Readings Part-1' and 'Readings in English'. It was essentially a textual analysis of how gender roles are represented in these texts. Even though there are a significant number of texts with female names, the researchers indicated that both courses failed to maintain gender balance in terms of the inclusion of female writers and female-related problems. This study proposed including gender-related themes and texts written by women writers at all levels, from elementary to master's degree. This type of study focuses on equal inclusion of both genders in all areas of lives and makes the young minds aware about gender issues and equality from the basic level.

Pradhan (2018) studied female EFL teachers' professional development. The main purpose of this research was to observe how female EFL teachers perceive and understand professional development and uncover the experiences they have undergone in their journey of professional development. She approached four female EFL teachers from different institutional schools in Nepal. In the study, she found that her participants had a very positive attitude toward TPD. They preferred informal ways of professional development far more. They further stated that higher academic degrees and formal training boost their self-esteem and confidence. Their main challenges were household responsibilities and gender-biased social constructs. They even had to be dependent on the family's decision and permission in their rights to reproduction and higher studies. However, extrinsic and intrinsic motivations played a vital role in helping them grow professionally. In the Nepalese context, men in the family need to encourage women to further their studies taking half responsibility of the house from rearing children to domestic chores. It is also the institutional responsibility to encourage women teachers to take part in professional training granting leaves and funds.

Pokharel (2021) studied female English language teachers' identities. She collected data through in-depth interviews with the participants. Her study concluded that the exposure that the female English language teachers get from the beginning of their life to the beginning of their professional life determines their position and perception towards teaching; and those phenomena of being from the very beginning help to shape the becoming of the self. Exposure here entails the equal opportunity of education, a voice for their rights, and professional training that are vital in professional identity construction in later life.

Hassan (2016) investigated female teachers' professional development through action research practice. The data was gathered through teacher reflection and in-depth interviews. According to the EFL teachers, their participation in action research (AR) contributed to their professional development. The teachers believed that AR brings opportunities, particularly for women teachers who have additional responsibilities at home and in their communities. Furthermore, in-service action research is a cost-effective, efficient, and successful approach to professional development. The study focused on the importance of action research as an approach to the professional development of women English language teachers. It helps to find out the immediate solutions for the specific problems of their classrooms.

Therefore, the opportunity for additional education and professional training, action research, family and institutional support, associations for teachers' professional development, online network groups, and inclusion of gender equality in textbooks are essential to the professional development of women English language teachers. With these, it is also important to study the attitudes and perceptions of women English language teachers about TPD. If they have positive attitudes and good perceptions about TPT, they are motivated to get involved in the process of TPD.

The purpose of this study is to explore the perceptions of women English language teachers on TPD. The main research question of this study is: how do women English language teachers perceive TPD?

## **Methodology**

To explore the perceptions of women English language teachers about professional development, I chose narrative inquiry as a research method for the study. Through narration, we can better comprehend the inner mental worlds of language teachers and students, as well as the nature of language teaching and learning as a social and educational activity (Barkhuizen, Benson & Chik, 2014). I reflect and share my own teaching experiences (stories) with my students and colleagues. I believe our stories are powerful and need to be shared and heard in different ELT forums so that we learn and grow together from

each other's stories. Through the telling of stories, these women English language teachers reflected on their experiences and made sense of them in the study. Experience happens narratively. Therefore, the educational experience should be studied narratively (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 19).

I selected four women English language teachers purposely as a small size of participants is useful for a qualitative study (Creswell, 2008). I chose Rupandehi as my research site. For that, I inquired if the participants shared a similar type of socio-cultural background and teaching experience through my personal contact with the participants and their teaching institutions. All the participants had teaching experience of more than 15 years. Therefore, the primary data was collected in the form of narration of their lived experiences regarding TPD through in-depth interviews.

The stories of the participants were analyzed and interpreted systematically focusing both on content and context using the framework proposed by Saldana, (2016). At first, I transcribed the recorded data of participants and analyzed. Then, the data was organized into the respective categories on the basis of the question. After going through the coding process, I consolidated the data. After that, I gave meanings and structures to the participants' narratives in different categories. This further led to the generalization of the themes.

## **Results and Discussion**

On the basis of their responses to the perception of TPD, three sub-themes have been generated: professional development means: updating professionalism, learning and sharing the art of teaching and bringing change in students' output.

### **Updating Professionalism**

This theme was generated from the responses of the participants to my question: how do they perceive TPD for career enhancement? The participants expressed the common view in different ways that teaching is a continuous process; teachers have to update themselves to sustain their careers through formal and informal modes of professional development activities and events.

In this, participant teacher 1 stated:

*Teachers' professional development is a continuous process for sustaining a career. One can attend training, seminars and conferences for learning new knowledge and skills in teaching. A teacher needs to learn throughout life in order to update with the changing trends in teaching and learning language and also to compete in the global market.*

She viewed teachers' professional development as an ongoing process. One has to do it formally and informally throughout the teaching profession. She finds it rewarding as it helps her grow professionally. One can update oneself in ELT attending seminars and conferences.

Similarly, participant teacher 2 expressed:

*Professional development is a life-long process. It is required for updating our professionalism. Moreover, it needs to address the needs and expectations of the students and teachers.*

Similarly, participant teacher 3 described:

*TPD is very important for teachers, students and institutions as a whole. However, TPD activities need to be designed keeping in mind the diverse needs of the teachers, students and the teaching institutions.*

They believe that they can change the way of teaching if TPD is made relevant and contextual according to the academic environment, needs of the teachers and the institutions and level of our students.

In a similar prospect, participant teacher 4 opined:

*In my opinion, TPD is important for learning teaching skills and strategies for teachers. Teaching institutions need to conduct TPD activities in school to enhance the performance level, skills, knowledge, and techniques on the part of EFL teachers. Our school conducts workshops and seminars from time to time. It not only helps applying the learned skills in my practical life but also enhances the overall development of students to a greater extent.*

These participants opined that TPD activities are important for updating the profession. They need to help teachers bring change in the teaching strategies and pedagogy. By applying them to classroom practices, teachers can meet the needs and expectations of the students with better outcomes. In the same vein, Kizilbash (2016) states that there are three major goals of professional development programs for teachers. These are "change in classroom practices of teachers, change in their attitudes and beliefs, and change in the learning outcomes of students" (p. 20). Moreover, there are some other impediments that distort the implementation part of training in the classroom in the context of Nepal i.e., insufficient teaching-learning materials, technological barriers, insufficient time, large classrooms, tired students, lengthy courses, exam-oriented teaching are the major barriers in the execution of the strategies in the classroom. As a result, it has a negative impact on

students' achievement. Baral (2019) found the level of achievement of students in Nepal's public schools very poor, according to the country's assessment of students' performance.

With TPD training by the government, teachers need to go through several practices on their own to sustain in this profession. In this regard, Padwad (2011), argued that professional development is essentially a personal journey and that one must work out one's personal meaning, agenda, and action plan for meaningful and sustainable professional development, i.e., read various scholarly journals that inform about innovative pedagogies and new information in the field of ELT that are useful for their classroom context. To shed light on the same issue (Lee, 2011), teachers' active participation is increasingly recognized as an important part of their ongoing professional development. The aforementioned responses revealed that these participants have a good understanding and positive perception of TPD. Interestingly, they think that TPD activities i.e., in-service education, mentoring, peer work, team teaching, observation, reading, writing, publishing, and presenting are beneficial for updating the teaching profession which is essential for sustainable career development.

Hence, TPD is a continuous process. Teachers need to be motivated individually and institutionally to get involved in this process. The previous studies mainly focused on how English language teachers go through the TPD process. But present study focuses on how these teachers perceive TPD and what their attitudes on it are.

#### Learning and sharing the art of teaching

*Regarding the question about the understanding of PD, the participants commonly expressed that PD is a kind of pair-share of knowledge and expertise among ELT professionals. Allwright (2005) mentions that English language teachers are more likely to experiment with the most recent advancements in education and language teaching theories with their students allowing them to continue to develop in the adaptation and application of their art and craft, which is crucial for their professional development.*

In this regard, participant teacher 1 stated:

*TPD opportunities help teachers learn pedagogy, teaching methods, and strategies. They can meet with ELT experts in different platforms i.e., British Council, NELTA, STFT, ITAEFL, etc. It is about learning the art of teaching in the ELT forum.*

Her answer reveals that she takes TPD events and activities as formal platforms as the opportunity to meet with ELT experts and learn to teach better. She stated that the experts' expertise on current issues in ELT helps language teachers learn to teach better. Tsui (2005, 2009) distinguishes two types of teaching expertise: expertise as a "state" and expertise as a

“process.” Expertise as a state examines characteristics associated with a teacher after years of teaching, whereas expertise as a process examines teachers’ development of various characteristics over time (as cited in Farrel, 2013, p.136). Therefore, being an expert is not only having years of teaching experience rather one has to go through a long process of TPD events and activities. In this regard, Mwila et al. (2022) write that experts must possess the skill to initiate, frame, and sustain the TPD learning process. They also require winning over the mentee’s trust in their willingness to work together and overcome the difficult challenges of professional learning in the fast-paced environment of daily school life. Therefore, the above response shows that if trainers, mentors, or coaches have good expertise in the respective field, they can motivate and build up trust for sustainable TPD activities for teachers’ development.

In this regard, participant teacher 2 expressed:

*Professional meetings with experts either as participants or as trainers boost up knowledge, skills and confidence of the teachers. Recently, I worked in a training session collaboratively with a professional trainer for teachers teaching grade 11/12 new courses in 2022. It was organized jointly by NELTA and the British Council. This has developed my confidence as a trainer.*

Good TPD encourages professional collaboration and sharing among teachers and experts (Quadhi, 2021). Her collaborative practice with an expert improved her professional practice through sharing knowledge, and skills.

Participant teacher 3 mentioned:

*For me conferences, seminars and workshops are good platforms for learning and sharing teaching experiences nationally and internationally.*

Teaching institutions require conducting training, seminars, and workshops to enhance teachers’ development for both in-service teachers and novice teachers. Through these, teachers can familiarize themselves with experts and share their own experiences with their colleagues. Furthermore, they are encouraged to carry out research studies and pair-share them in the training programs. Ealing Learning Partnership (ELP) and other schools have developed and delivered a broad program of developmental courses, networks, meetings, conferences, and other centrally run or school-based CPD opportunities for schools. They collaborate with associate colleagues to improve all aspects of learning and school effectiveness (Ealing Learning Partnership (ELP), children and adults’ service, 2022). This type of collaboration becomes a catalyst for the success of the entire education system.



### Bringing the change in students' output

*In response to the understanding of professional development, the participants came out with the common reply that teachers' professional development ultimately has to do with the student's outcome.*

In this regard, participant teacher 4 stated:

*Through TPD activities, teachers gain knowledge on the subject matters, enhance teaching techniques and improve teaching skills. They apply the learnt knowledge and teaching strategies in their day-to-day classroom. As a result, it helps to develop student's performance as a whole.*

In relation to the above response, I connect the idea of Diaz Maggioli (2003), who mentions that the strength of professional development strategies resides in the fact that they all have as their primary ambition to enhance learning quality and the demands of the teachers. Teachers will be more prepared to handle the problems of the future by implementing the strategies for the progress and development of the students, while also enabling schools to become stronger institutions of learning. Similarly, the public nature of teaching inspires teachers and raises social expectations for them to find strategies to raise student achievement (Mushayikwa & Lubben, 2009).

In this prospect, participant teacher 3 said:

*In the formal type of professional development activities, teachers get resources that are helpful in using the curriculum in the classroom. They also get ample language exposure, get engaged in collaborative learning and develop presentation skills. This helps them to make their classroom more effective. They will also help students to learn in groups, come out with the answers and present them in the class.*

This idea of TPD is related to the idea that resources made accessible to the teachers have a significant impact on how well a curriculum is delivered in the classroom. As a result, it's critical that both teachers and students have access to the right resources and are trained on how to use them. Furthermore, this training helps language teachers to make students work in groups, use the language as much as possible and present in the class.

From the findings of this study, it is clear that these women English language teachers have a very good understanding of professional development. Apart from formal training of the Ministry of Education, they are involved in many other forums for TPD events and activities. They are also found to attend many online training sessions and have continued further education as well. Therefore, it is unfair to underestimate their qualifications and experiences while assigning classes and for promotions.

## Conclusion and Implications

It can be concluded that these women English language teachers who took part in this study seem to take TPD as a continuous process, help update professionalism through learning and share the art of teaching going beyond the confines of TPD training administered by the Ministry of Education. Their stories also make it clear that they grab many professional opportunities and participate in a variety of formal and informal TPD activities for professional development. Most of them are found to begin their careers in teaching from institutional schools and further their studies side by side. The early teaching career is not only helpful for their financial independence; it assists them in better results in academic achievements and vice versa. However, they gradually come to understand the value of ongoing career and in-service training for their professional development.

It is also explored that they have developed a long professional path for upgrading themselves. In addition to the TPD's official training sessions, they have updated themselves by attending conferences, seminars, and workshops. Additionally, they acknowledge that during the pandemic, webinars were found to be beneficial for TPD. They also develop professional skills through self-reflection and action research. Additionally, scholarly journals, book chapters, lectures at home and abroad, and publications have given them a sense of psychological and professional empowerment.

These female English language teachers were found to be more goal-oriented and independent practitioners of TPD and decision-makers about their education and career in comparison to women English language teachers in Nepal a few years back. The primary reason for this was that these female teachers began their careers early and were financially self-sustained.

From the perceptions of women English language teachers about TPD, I found that they are aware of their professional growth. Additionally, women English language teachers need to be made aware to be engaged in online training and other forms of formal and informal TPD activities and events. I found online forums especially beneficial for women teachers. I myself got involved in different online ELT platforms during COVID-19 without being bothered of travel, lodging and food.

At the same time, this study has the potential for guiding other researchers for carrying out studies incorporating many issues related to women English language teachers that can be included in further research. Gender-specific training for women English language teachers, incentives for greater participation in training, the inclusion of women English language teachers as mentors and trainers in training etc. are some of the areas that might help to explore more on women English language teachers' TPD.

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