

## Activities Undertaken by the English Language Teachers for Professional Development

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### Abstract

*The success of language learning and teaching mainly depends upon the professional activities that the teachers employ to improve job performance and provide appropriate input for better learning output in their students. By attending various workshop seminars and trainings, teachers update professional skills regularly and make their teaching career better and efficient. This study aimed at exploring the most common activities undertaken by the English language teachers for developing their professional skills. The study was carried out within the theoretical framework of social constructivism adopting narrative inquiry method to bring lived experiences of the participants. By using unstructured interview, I gathered information from two teacher participants teaching at secondary level in community schools in Butwal Sub-Metropolitan city, Rupandehi. The study revealed that the English language teachers were found attending conferences, trainings and workshop seminars, engaging in action research and academic writing for their professional development. However, poor internet access, lack of regular professional trainings and collaborative culture among them were the major challenges in teachers' professional development. The study can contribute to improve the classroom pedagogy of the English language teachers and provide some insights to their knowledge and professional skills in the practices of various professional activities to be much more competent and skillful.*

**Keywords:** action research, class management, professional development, technology integration

### Introduction

In the present postmodern era, teaching and learning activities are no longer limited to the textbooks and inside the classroom but they also occur both inside and outside the classroom. Regarding this, Hayes (2014) states, "Professional development (PD) is a multi-faced life long experience, which can take place inside or outside the work place" (p. 5). Sharing ideas among teachers, conducting action research, reading and writing academic works, teachers can learn and adjust their teaching in specific contexts. PD refers to the process that supports individual's improvement in professionalism (Evans, 2008). Since teachers are the key agents to bring out improvement in teaching and learning activities, they must engage themselves in professional activities. PD is the process of making teachers proficient at applying the knowledge and skills they have obtained in the classroom practice (Gnawali, 2016). So, it is an ongoing and comprehensive process which starts with the pre-service teacher education, in-service trainings and continues until the retirement which fosters improvement in their profession (Richards & Farrell, 2005; Villegas-Reimer, 2003). Professional development is a process which makes teachers professionals so that they can be efficient at their work and grow themselves in academic field (Gnawali, 2016). Thus, professional teachers can identify the problems and find the way to solve the problem related to teaching and learning.

Professional development is a lifelong learning process in which teachers have to understand the need of learning either in formal or informal setting (Kabilan et al., 2011). "Self-practice, reflecting on one's own performance, interacting with colleagues, seeking answers to emerging issues, and reading to keep one-self up-to-date come under informal learning whereas formal learning involves pursuing higher education, undertaking teacher training courses, attending workshop seminars and conferences" (Joshi et al. 2018. p.54). It is therefore, PD is lifelong learning which helps teachers master new teaching skills, widen their knowledge, develop an innovative insight into their pedagogy, their practice and understanding of their own needs, for developing them to be more professional. Simply, PD provides learning opportunities that engage teachers' creative and reflective capacities in the ways that strengthen their practice (Bredeson, 2002). Thus, teachers' engagement in professional activities facilitates them to enhance their professional skills.

Professional development includes both formal experiences such as attending at workshops, professional meetings and informal experiences such as reading professional publications, watching TV documentaries related to the profession (Glatthorn, 1995). This shows that PD is a long term process where teachers learn over time with active participation through evaluation, observation and reflection in specific contexts (Villegas-Reimers, 2003). It is a collaborative process that involves co-operation and viewing the teacher as a reflective practitioner. Therefore, there is an urgent need to shift from the traditional professional development practices to creative and learner-centered practices which help them raise students' achievements, and become proficient teachers.

Professional development supports teachers to make them more competent and skillful in their profession applying their knowledge and skills in the classroom practice in a better way. Furthermore, PD is "the sum total of formal and informal learning pursued and experienced by the teacher in a compelling and

dynamic change” (Fullan, 1995, p. 265). It is therefore, by taking part in different work-shops, seminars, trainings, writing research articles; teachers can improve their professional skills. It also keeps them up-to date on current trends and helps them develop new skills for the purpose of advancement in teaching field. PD of teachers implies adaptation to change with a view to changing teaching and learning activities (Heideman, 1990). Professional development supports to adopt new teaching and learning activities.

Professional development of teacher as the ultimate goal of educating teachers is to get mastery over the scientific concepts of teaching and learning the second/ foreign languages and enables them to make use of the skills and knowledge they have gained in actual classroom instructions. The teachers themselves are likely to be more responsible for professional improvement with the assumption that individuals could identify their own learning needs and more interested in taking actions. Professional development is a process in which a learner assumes primary responsibility for planning, implementing, and evaluating the learning process where a resource person often plays a facilitating role in the process (Guskey, 2000). He further claimed that PD activities support to enhance the professional knowledge, skills, and attitudes of educators so that they can improve the learning of students. Similarly, PD facilitates teachers to obtain new knowledge and skills to improve their teaching through direct experiences with methods that help students learn in new and effective ways (Lee, 2002). Consequently it helps them to be professionally strong with methodology, skills and techniques.

### **Review of Literature**

Professional activities are crucial as they impact on teachers' ability to gain and develop pedagogical knowledge and skills. Conducting action research continually, preparing a portfolio, participating in peer coaching sessions and designing educational programmes are some important activities of PD. Regarding this, Richards and Farrell (2005) mentioned the following activities for teachers to participate in engaging in self-reflection and evaluation, developing specialized knowledge and skills about many aspects of teaching, expanding their knowledge base about research, theory and issues in teaching, taking on new roles and responsibilities such as supervisor or mentor teacher, teacher researcher, or material writer developing collaborative relationship with other teachers. Similarly, workshops, self-monitoring, and teacher support groups, keeping a teaching journal, peer observation, teaching portfolios, analyzing critical incidents, case analysis, peer coaching, team teaching and action research are other activities of professional development. Hence, these activities are indispensable for effective teaching learning system.

Professional development activities support for the improvement of teachers' content knowledge, teaching skills and practices required to their profession (Darling-Hammond, & McLaughlin, 1995). Moreover, such activities support teacher preparation and improvement (Birman et al. 2000). By updating the knowledge and professional skills, the teachers can make their teaching career better. Thus, subject matter knowledge, pedagogical content knowledge and contextual knowledge helps them develop their professionalism.

Similarly, Regmi's (2012) study on teachers' PD concluded that the training develops a positive attitude in teachers for teaching effectively, however, lack of teachers' honesty in their profession, lack of

resourcefulness and effective training sessions created problems in the implementation of the programme effectively in the Nepali context. Like-wise, Shoqair and Shaaban (2013) illustrated that attending educational lectures, participating in academic activities (conferences, workshops), reading educational magazines and different educational articles and researches, participating in group discussion with colleagues in school, depending on self- reflection based on international standards, considering reports of exchange visits, asking students for feedback, consulting experts of education, using social networks such as Twitter, Face book, in exchanging viewpoints and experiences, teachers develop professional skills. Consequently, participating in educational e-forums, conducting action research continually, preparing a portfolio, participating in peer coaching sessions, participating in designing educational programmes, engaging in academic writing and familiarizing with digital literacy, teachers can develop their professionalism in teaching. .

In the same way, Shah (2015) conducted a research study on Nepalese EFL teachers' professional development. The study explored that some external or non-governmental organizations, such as British Council Nepal, American Embassy, and Rural Education and Environment Development Centre, etc. contribute to EFL teachers' professional development programmes.

Similarly, the study of Gnawali (2016) explored that teachers' professional associations also contribute partly to teachers' professional development activity. For instance; in the context of EFL teachers, the Nepal English Language Teachers' Association (NELTA) is an important organization to support EFL teachers' professional development. In particular, it creates opportunities for professional networks, organizes conferences workshop seminars, and updates EFL teachers on EFL teaching related issues via its blogging, a news letter and a peer-reviewed journal.

The study of Darling-Hammond et al. (2017) pointed out that a well-designed and implemented professional development is considered an indispensable part of a comprehensive system of teaching and learning that supports students' learning and competencies needed in the 21st century (as cited in Joshi et al. 2018). Thus, PD activities have positive effects on developing knowledge and skills of teachers and change in their teaching which focus on subject-matter knowledge and opportunities for active learning. I also believe professional development facilitates learners to generate new ideas, knowledge and skills in their field. Like-wise, Rouf and Mohamed (2017) explored that secondary English language teachers play a significant role in imparting quality L2 education for learners in Bangladesh. To ensure quality classroom instruction and teachers' professional development, they recommended a mechanism to deliver effective continuous professional development. One-time pre-service training cannot prepare teachers for their whole career as new ideas and practices influence teaching-learning frequently. Therefore, teachers can update emerging trends and techniques of teaching by attending ongoing in-service trainings.

Accordingly, Joshi et al. (2018) found that Nepalese EFL teachers have positive experience towards different PD strategies and they have been benefited mostly from self-directed (own teaching experience and self-monitoring), profession-related (workshops, seminars and conferences) and peer-supported (learning from colleagues) PD strategies. The study also suggested the need for ongoing need-based PD activities for EFL teachers in Nepal.

The need for adopting different initiations of professional development for English language

teachers is highly advised to cope with the present academic environment globally. Weaknesses of teachers in adopting new trends in teaching and updating their knowledge in their field remain to be the most significant factors that affect their performance inside the classrooms. I selected this topic for my study as it is one of the new and less explored topics in the area of professional development in the context of Nepal. The purpose of the study was to explore and analyze the activities undertaken by the English language teachers and assess the opportunities and challenges that they encounter in course of developing the professional skills. This study has addressed the following research questions.

What activities do the English language teachers undertake for their professional development?

What opportunities and challenges do they encounter in developing the professional skills?

### **Theoretical Perspective**

As a theoretical basis for my study, I adopted social constructivism which is applicable to this study. It provides a comfortable learning space as knowledge is socially and culturally constructed by means of interaction (Vygotsky, 1978). In this regard, Vygotsky claimed that through scaffolding learners can complete tasks that they cannot complete by themselves. The basic belief of social constructivism is that knowledge is actively constructed by the learners through interaction with peers. This theory claims that dialogue with others is more important than just exposing the learner to new materials through provision of resources. It also believes that learners learn in a better and effective way if there is peer support in their learning process (Keshavarz et al. 2014, Lin, 2009). Hence, scaffolding helps to get a unique way of internalization of knowledge of language in each student. This theory also talks that students learn better when they have others to support them in classroom.

### **Methodology**

A narrative inquiry under qualitative method was employed in this study to explore the lived experience of the English language teachers. Narrative is one of the few human endeavors widely spread as a basic aspect of human life and an essential approach of human expression (Kim, 2016). I selected two trained English language teachers teaching at secondary level as research participants purposively from two community schools of Butwal Sub-Metropolitan city, Nepal to elicit the information from them for the study. Out of them, one was a man and another was a woman who had been teaching English for more than five years. Also, they were taking part in professional activities regularly. The participants agreed to share their lived experiences regarding the activities under-taken by them for their professional development. I gathered information applying unstructured interview to get 'the world of human experience' and to get in touch with people who have in-depth knowledge about particular issues' (Cohen et al. 2007). The average length of the interview was about 30 minutes. Taking the consent from them, I recorded their views and later transcribed on Microsoft word processing. Then, the information was coded and categorized into two main themes and three sub- themes under each theme to generate the meaning followed by interpretation and analysis of the themes. During the information gathering, I protected participants' right to privacy, confidentiality and used their pseudonyms while analyzing.

### **Results and Discussion**

The collected information has been discussed and analyzed in two main themes and three sub-themes under each main theme incorporating major ideas drawn from the participants along with supporting literature.

### **Activities of Professional Development**

Teachers are engaged in various activities for their professional development, such as attending conferences, trainings, workshops seminars, etc.

#### **Attending Conferences, Trainings and Workshop Seminars**

English language teachers claimed that they developed professional skills attending conferences, trainings and workshop seminars.

In this vein, Mohan stated, “I am a life member of NELTA, I attend national and international conferences and become familiar with current teaching methods. Conferences boost our confidence and make teaching learning process more effective supporting me to update my professional skills”. His lived experience showed that conferences provided him learning opportunities for developing professionalism in bringing about real change on his pedagogical effectiveness. For this, (Gnawali, 2016) mentioned linking ELT professionals through conferences and other events; they provide learning opportunities for members. NELTA as the platform of developing professionalism brings changes on their pedagogical effectiveness. Trainings and work-shops believe in the notion that one size does not fit for all’ where the participants get ideas on treating individual differences as workshop focuses on developing content knowledge and active learning (Wallhead & Ward, 2006). Thus, they claimed they learnt new things from the conferences they attended.

In this context, Muna claimed, “I am taking part in TPD training from my school and getting new ideas to update my teaching and improve my teaching performance. It also helps me make my teaching child friendly”. Her experience indicated that training is a prerequisite for teachers for their professional development and to have up-dates about her teaching profession. In fact, it is an ongoing and never ending process. Training is an act of increasing knowledge, skill and attitude of an employee for improving his/her performance on the job (Bhatia, 2005). She further added, “I sometimes participate in workshops to enhance my practical teaching skills. Workshops help us acquire specific knowledge and skills, and provide ideas for improving our classroom practices”. Her experience clarified that workshops also enhance teachers’ specific knowledge and skills to become more competent and help resolve the classroom related problems which occur in day- to- day teaching activities as constructivists claim. Similarly, my participant’s experience is also in harmony with Pokhrel and Behera ( 2016) who claimed TPD has been realized as a powerful approach to implement child friendly activity-based education in the 21st century. In this line, Mohan stated, “Seminars provide a healthy environment to discuss ELT practices, challenges and classroom problems with various teachers of various places”. Mohan’s lived experience indicated that workshop seminars provide them opportunities to discuss ELT practices, challenges and classroom problems. As they have immediate applications in the class, they promote collaborative work and support for the promotion of effective and efficient organizations. This is similar to Vygotsky’s idea

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of the zone of proximal development. This means that interaction with a more capable person is more important than just exposing the learner to new material through lectures.

### **Engaging in Action Research and Academic Writing**

Participants claimed they learnt from their own experience. Action research is one of the major sources of developing teacher professionalism. Regarding action research, Mohan stated, "I have learnt more from my own teaching experiences. When I face a particular problem in my class, I carry out action research on it so that I can solve the problem myself". His lived experience on professional development confirmed that *action research* as classroom-based research addresses the immediate practical class room teaching problems to improve the quality of teaching with a better exchange of ideas among colleagues. Moreover, it helped become a better and competent teacher changing the existing problematic situation of teaching and learning process and ultimately, it developed teachers professionally. He further claimed, "I always observe on my classroom activities, what works well and what doesn't work peruse improving. Sometimes I publish research articles in national journals on teaching issues as well". His experience shows when teachers are engaged themselves in academic writing, they can develop their professional skills from self monitoring, self reflective and could make their teaching and learning more effective finding the solutions for a problem. Therefore, They themselves need to be conscious and take initiative for their professional development.

In the same line, Muna asserted, "I have to carry out action research related to classroom activities every year. Action research helps me solve the problem that I encounter in my class in a very short span of time. Nowadays, it is in practice". Her experience indicated that teachers were involved in such research activities and they had realized the importance of research activities. She was found to have similar view of Mohan which clarified that both participants engaged in action research to solve the classroom problems. Regarding the action research in professional development, Richards and Farrell (2005) stated, "Action research is designed to illuminate an issue or problem, and to expand and improve classroom practice" (p.171). It is therefore, action research conducted in classroom context to improve the quality of his/her own practical practices where the teacher identifies a particular problem of the class, collect data on the issue, devises a strategy to address the issue, tries out the strategic and observes its effects.

### **Use of ICT Devices in Teaching and Learning**

Information and communications technology devices facilitate to make teaching and learning activities effective and efficient. In this regard, Muna claimed, "I sometimes get opportunity to attend ICT trainings and work-shops seminars conducted by education district office which support me to increase knowledge, skills and techniques of teaching. Now, I am using internet to search various texts". Her engagement in ICT training indicated that for effective and efficient teaching and learning, the use of ICT devices has helped her. Internet as a component having immense potentials facilitates teaching and learning allowing content to be delivered anywhere and anytime (Olowa, 2012). Regarding the use of ICT for professional development, Mohan viewed, "I get most of the required information and resources in the internet which really helps me develop my profession as a teacher". His response reflected the use of internet

in learning helped him develop his professionalism as a teacher. He obtains different teaching materials like reference e-books, journals, etc., which are useful for teaching practice then get an opportunity to widen his professional knowledge and networks. Nevertheless, he used ICT less for the purpose of developing his professional career. In the same vein, Muna stated her view thus, “I search new contents to be taught in webs and use them in my class regularly”. Her experience also indicated that she searched new teaching contents to be taught in webs and used them in her class. The narratives of the participants explored that use of ICT devices provided them opportunities to improve their professional skills and make teacher better.

### **Challenges**

Under this heading, I discussed, interpreted and analyzed the challenges faced by the participants in course of developing professional skills.

#### **Poor Internet Access to Required Resources**

The teachers emphasize on the limited resources as the major factors for applying professional skills in real classroom teaching. The resources available in school affect them in undertaking their professional development activities. Inadequate resources and materials are major challenges for applying the activities of professional development in everyday classes. A technology integration skill is mandatory for professional development. Both participants were using technology in their classes, however, only one participant had taken formal basic training in it.

In this context, Muna asserted:

I am not competent enough in technology integration skills. However, I search new things related to the text from internet but internet access in my house and school is poor because power is frequently cut. On the other hand, I have little time to search everything from internet.

Her experience revealed that teachers needed access to technology and teacher training on basic computer skills to enhance their skills and knowledge to teach their students effectively. She was not able to implement the new skills due to the poor internet access in searching resources and overloaded teaching hours. Training programmes were conducted from different organizations over a different period of time. However, the participant teachers were keen on applying the skills, ideas, techniques, etc. learnt from the training sessions in their real classroom situations.

#### **Lack of Regular Professional Training and Collaborative Culture**

Regular professional trainings and workshops are very crucial to develop skills required to teaching. Teacher collaboration helps teachers reflect on their teaching practices, and evaluate their activities, and reinforce their actions and behaviors in the classroom (Reeves et al. 2017). However, such programmes are not run frequently and effectively for effective implementation of it by the school. In this context, Muna claimed, “I have attended trainings and workshop only twice since I started teaching”. From the above statement made by Muna revealed that regular professional trainings and workshops are required for effective implementation of professional skills.

Collaborative sharing is also important for better application of knowledge and skills in real classroom teaching. However, the teachers were reluctant to share their problems and experiences of their teaching



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with their colleagues Muna further mentioned, “I learn new things from my colleagues, sometimes, we discuss about classroom challenges and learn from each other’s teaching experiences. We can learn many things sharing ideas with our colleagues but we have very little collaborative culture among us”. Her lived experience revealed that the importance of collaboration in teaching and learning but she was unable to do so regularly in the real context. The study of Atay (2006) clarified that participants in collaborative research had a positive impact on the professional development in-service teachers by broadening their perceptions of research, helping them to recognize the value of collaboration, and encouraging them to implement in new institutional practices. The school where she has been teaching has little collaborative culture among the colleagues. Even if some teachers are highly benefitted by teacher support group. In many schools, senior and skilled teachers support novice teachers. However, there is less formal collaborative teacher learning activity. Very limited teachers carried out action researches in their classroom while others did not know how to conduct it and they are unfamiliar with its possible benefits. Social constructivists, however, argue knowledge is the outcome of collaborative construction in a socio-cultural context mediated by discourse; learning is fostered through interactive processes of information sharing, negotiation, and discussion (Liaw, 2004). Thus, interaction between friends and teacher is mandatory on creating learning environment that could mediate learners for obtaining of new information and the construction knowledge.

### **Class Management and Administrative Support**

Class management is challengeable and crucial for the teachers to apply professional skills in real classroom situations. It is also essential to optimize academic engagement of students. Regarding class management, Muna maintained, “In my classroom, furniture is not movable to perform group work to provide a favourable atmosphere to everyone even if I form groups or pairs to make them work together”. Her response indicated that uncomfortable seating arrangement is another barrier in applying learnt skills and techniques in real classroom teaching. On the other hand, administrative support also assists teachers to apply the new techniques on their teaching. Without administrative support and regular supervision or follow up activity by the team of experts and mentoring teachers, it is difficult to implement professional skills in ELT context effectively.

In this line, Mohan argued, “As government has not provided adequate financial support to run workshop and training programmes, English teachers are not getting equal opportunities”. His response clarified that there is lack of adequate financial support but the government for teachers’ professional development. Mohan’s views are in harmony with Timilsina (2014) who reported that there is lack of adequate governmental financial support from institutions to provide systematic on-going professional development programmes.

### **Conclusion and Implications**

Professional activities are inevitable to prepare abler and competent teachers making their teaching career better and efficient. This study was designed to explore the activities undertaken by the English language teachers for their professional development employing narrative inquiry. The study shows that teachers are found to develop their professional skills by attending conferences, trainings and workshop

seminars engaging in action researches and academic writing in teaching and learning. However, poor internet access, lack of regular professional trainings and collaborative culture among them, poor class management and administrative support are the challenges in teachers' professional development. The study can contribute providing some insights to the secondary level English language teachers to improve their classroom pedagogy familiarizing with professional activities, knowledge and skills encouraging them to participate in professional development programmes to prepare them for the 21<sup>st</sup> century classes.

Thus, the results of the study clearly suggest providing internet access and regular professional trainings developing the collaborative culture among teachers so that they can share ideas among them minimizing the challenges that they face for developing professional skills. Activities undertaken by university teacher educators for their professional development and the challenges faced by them in developing professional skills in teaching and learning in English classrooms in the context of Nepal can be other areas for further research.

Since this is a small-scale qualitative study conducted in Rupandehi district, only with two participants using in-depth interview, its generalizations may have little applicability and validity. Therefore, a large-scale study is needed to be carried out incorporating greater area and big sample population using new techniques such as questionnaires, observation. Moreover, mixed research design would be worth considering for the further research.

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