Critical Friends Group for English Language Teachers' Professional Development

Juna Rayamajhi

Secondary Level Teacher, Shree Ganesh Secondary School, Sindhuli
Email: rayamjhijuna@gmail.com

Abstract

This article entitled 'Critical Friends Group (CFG) for English Language Teachers' Professional Development' aims to investigate teachers' perceptions towards CFG for English language teachers' professional development. This is a qualitative research method based on narrative inquiry. The data was collected from five English language teachers teaching in five different government schools by using semi-structured interview. The participants were selected by using judgemental non- random sampling procedures. The findings showed that teachers perceived CFG as one of the plausible means of their professional development. It helped them to foster collaborative and critical learning in them because they were involved in observation, reading and discussion of various burning issues of English language teaching and learning. It also indicated that teachers perceived CFG as the best platform for enhancing the personal, social and professional development. It has enhanced the professionalism on the part of teachers cultivating the sense of mutual trust and understanding between and among the colleagues.

Keywords: collaboration, critical friend group, Nepal, professional development, professional learning community

Introduction

English in Nepal is taught and learnt as a foreign language. It is included in the curriculum from the very beginning to the university level. However, English language teaching in the present context has become more challenging. Nowadays, teacher professional development is regarded as a continuous professional growth, developing both competence and performance skills and the process of becoming effective teacher. "Teacher development is the professional growth a teacher achieves as a result of gaining increased experience and examining his or her teaching systematically" (Glathorn, 1995, as cited in Villegas-Reimers, 2003, p.11). Teacher professional development includes formal experiences such as attending professional meeting, workshop, seminar, mentoring and informal experiences such as reading professional publications, keeping a

teaching journal and portfolio, analyzing critical incidents, doing action research being the part of teacher support and critical friends group.

Several educators (such as Larsen-freeman 2000; Nunan 2003 as cited in Vo and Nguyen, 2010, p. 205) have called for reformations in EFL teacher education in order to raise the quality of teaching and learning. It is believed that the poor quality of ELT (English Language Teaching) is partly attributable to a lack of sound teacher training and teacher professional development.

In this regard, Dunne and Honts (1998) state;

> Traditional professional development, characterized by short-term, de-contextualized, direct instruction, has been shown over and over again to be inadequate to the task of helping practitioners make deep and lasting changes in their practice. Over the past several years, school communities have switched their focus to highly reflective learning as a means of supporting teachers and increasing student achievement (p. 1).

That is why, nowadays, teacher professional development is regarded as a continuous professional growth, developing both competence and performance skills and the process of becoming effective teacher.

Robert (1998, p. 224) suggests that teachers can develop themselves by adopting various strategies like teaching professional collaboration helping others to learn innovation and research course, formal situation, self-study and language learning. Several models of TPD (Teacher Professional Development) like workshops, self-monitoring, and teacher support group, critical friends group, case analysis, action research, keeping a teaching journal etc. have been introduced.

The Critical Friends Group model was designed to build more reflective, collaborative, learning-focused schools through the creation of ongoing learning communities, and it depended on the intentional use of structured conversations or protocols and skilled facilitation to efficiently and effectively support the learning of the group's members (Dune, Naves, & Lewis, 2000). The CFG model is grounded in the concept of professional community developed by Louis and Kruse (1995).

According to Dunne and Honts (cited in Franzak 2002, p. 260), CFG is "A practitioner-driven study group that reflects the growing trend for site-based professional development in which practitioners behave as managers of their own learning". From aforementioned fact, we can say that CFG is a newly practiced technique of teacher professional development where the teachers having same goal come together for better learning. In addition, they become accountable for their own learning.

Researchers have already carried out many researches in the field of teacher professional development nationally and internationally. Harrington (2009) carried out a thesis entitled 'Critical Friends Group: Effects on Teacher Practice and Collaboration' submitted to the University of North Carolina Wilmington. The objective of the study was to find out the influence of participation in a Critical Friends Group (CFG) on teacher collaboration and practice. Aktekin (2019) investigated the impact of a Critical Friends Group (CFG), an inquiry-based professional development model, on Turkish EFL teachers. Gautam (2010) conducted a research entitled 'Perception of teachers on NELTA Activities for Professional Development' with an objective to identify the perception of teachers on NELTA activities for teachers' professional development in Morang district. Oli (2014) carried out the research entitled 'Practice of Teacher Support Group in Teachers Professional Development'. The main objective of the study was to explore the practice of teacher support group in teachers' professional development.

Teacher professional development (TPD) is an important determinant of teacher professionalism. It talks about multiple changes, which demands multi-level experience. It seeks from the teachers to be classroom learners to action researchers about classroom, cultural diplomats within cross-cultural setting of the classroom. It requires from the teacher's side to be reflective professional development is a personal journey to be specific.

Craft (1996, p. 6) says, "Professional development is sometimes used to describe moving teacher forward in knowledge or skills." Professional development or growth means enabling teachers to generate their own ideas about classroom practice. By considering these ideas about TPD it will be appropriate to take professional development as the activity towards the development of a person in his or her professional role (Villegas-Reimers, 2003, p.11). More specifically, it is the professional growth a teacher achieves as a result of gaining increased experience and examining his/her teaching systematically. It includes formal experiences such as attending workshops, professional meeting, mentoring and informal experiences such as reading professional publications, watching TV documentaries related to an academic discipline (Villegas-Reimers, 2003, p.11).

Critical Friends Group focuses on the improvement of individual teacher practice as well as shared knowledge among colleagues (Kuh, 2006). A CFG generally consists of eight to ten educators who come together voluntarily at least once a month or two hours and are committed to improving their practice through collaborative learning (National School Reform Faculty (NSRF), 2008). It shows that a CFG is an on-going practice where teachers continually learn about the content they teach as well as the instructional and assessment practices they use with that content.

Students' academic achievement is greater in schools where teachers report high levels of collective responsibility for student learning (Huffman & Jacobson, 2003). Dufour (2004, p. 6) states, "the idea of improving schools by developing professional learning communities is currently in vogue". Moreover, the purpose behind a CFG is to go beyond traditional collaboration experiences and provide teachers with the support they need to improve their teaching abilities.

Research reveals that teachers who have taken part in CFG generally hold positive opinions of it. They believe that they can affect student outcomes (McKenzie & Carr-Reardon, 2003). The structure and format of CFG create opportunities for colleagues to challenge their own practice as well as that of their peers (Bambino, 2002). In fact, research studies reported by Bambino (2002) indicate that CFGs have been the catalyst for changes in the teaching, learning, culture, and climate of learning communities in a variety of schools.

Furthermore, Bowman and McCormick (2000, p. 256) contend that collaboration among teachers is a valued and often necessary factor for effective schooling because it fosters expert instruction. Evidence they presented indicates that CFG is a feasible vehicle for instituting collaborative efforts. Through the social interaction of discussion, active learning evolves, and each participant interprets, transforms, and internalizes new knowledge as a result of collective thinking. Collaborative discussions allow individual teachers to develop their own perspectives and to model strengths for others.

In the context of Nepal, there are various forms of professional development organizations like Teacher Support Group (TSG), Nepal English Language Teachers' Association (NELTA), and Nepal Applied Linguistics Society (NALS) and so on but still the teachers' perception towards CFG for English language teachers' professional development has not got enough attention to be explored further. Thus, this article tries to find out teachers' perceptions towards critical friends group for English language teachers' professional development and attempts to find out the answer of how teachers perceive critical friends group for English language teacher's professional development.

Methods

This research article was based on narrative inquiry research design. Narrative inquiry is the process of gathering information for the purpose of research through storytelling. In narrative research designs, researchers describe the lives of individuals, collect and tell stories about people's lives and write narratives of individuals experiences (Creswell, 2012). This article aims to explore the teachers' perception towards CFG for English language teachers' professional development by using judgmental non-random sampling procedure. The participants of this study consisted of five teachers of mid-eastern part of Sindhuli district of five different schools, both lower secondary and secondary level

government schools. In order to ensure the ethical considerations, the participants have been given the pseudo names like T1, T2, T3, T4, and T5 respectively. The researcher used both primary and secondary sources of data. The research tool used was in-depth interview to explore teachers' perceptions about CFG for English language teacher professional development. The interview schedule was semi structured. Based on the objectives of this study, the questions were developed; the answers were recorded which were later transcribed, and coded as per the objectives of the study and finally analyzed thematically.

Results and Discussion

The recorded perceptions on Critical Friends Group have been explained in this section. While taking in-depth interview and conducting focused group discussion with the members of critical friends group, the researcher has arrived at the conclusion that all the participants perceived CFG as a best platform for their personal, social and professional development which have been categorized and described under various themes below:

CFG as a Network and Form of Professional Community

Hord (1997) spoke of the workplace as a learning organization. He gave several characteristics of professional learning communities, which include having and practicing supportive and shared leadership, values, vision, and direction; providing a forum for collective learning and the application of that learning; sharing professional practice; and providing supportive conditions for the maintenance of the learning community. Participants accepted that previously, they didn't have the ideas of forming the professional networking and learning communities for their professional upgrading. Having participated in CFG, they have realized the value of professional learning communities and networking for learning and sharing. Moreover, they are even willing to form the network across their schools for updating themselves with new and innovative teaching learning styles, strategies, methods and techniques. Agreeing with the above mentioned explanation, T5, and T2, said that,

> "*As I became the member of the CFG I came to know the value and worth of professional networking for learning the things that I don't know and sharing the things that I know well.*"

> "*If we make a network with the teachers who teach the same subject in the different part of the country, we can get new and successful ways of teaching and can modify the teaching styles and strategies accordingly.*"

From the researcher's observation it is found that CFG itself is professional networking within an institution where we could meet regularly face to face and can have better discussion. Not only this, it is an era of information communication and technology

providing us vast treasures of knowledge and information. Now what we can do is we can search the new inventions per day and can have discussion continuously. Likewise, by creating the professional Facebook page teachers can make the discussion virtually with the teachers of other schools and can practice the best things that they are doing. This demonstrates that the members of CFG are ready to form the professional networking within and across their schools for upgrading themselves and getting to know each other for learning and sharing the innovative teaching methods, techniques and styles for better outcomes of an individual student and of an institution.

CFG as a Platform for Collaboration

CFG has become the ground for working together to obtain the shared goals of an institution by making all the group members equally responsible to perform the assigned tasks. Smith and MacGregor (1992, p. 2) have defined collaborative learning as an umbrella term for a variety of educational approaches involving joint intellectual effort by students, or students and teachers together. During the semi-structured interview, almost all the participants agreed that critical friends group is the persons where all the critical friends are committed to work together to meet their shared goals for the blending of perspectives, expertise, resources and shared accountability and responsibility. Adding some points to the above mentioned descriptions, T2 and T4 said that,

> *Collaborative learning is the process of learning in a professional community. It means the collaborative learning is a way of learning in a team together to explore a significant question or create a meaningful project where they work together being individually accountable for their work, and the work of the group as a whole is assessed.*

> *Actually in our context we people don't have the habit of working together for gaining same goal because we prefer to regard ourselves as all in all and don't like to be the part of some groups that have caused the negative influences for our professional development.*

From the researcher's observation, it is revealed that this group has been very useful to understand that through collaboration we could reach the summit of success; we could share, diagnose and solve the various problems that arise in our professional careers. This indicates that the active participation in CFG helps to cultivate the habit of sharing, caring and concerning for each other in the areas of difficulties. They have realized the significance of working collectively in the every spheres of life to achieve the common targets.

CFG enhances Mutual Trust and Respect

CFG is one of the most important approaches in teacher professional development for developing mutual understanding and respect to each other. Harrington (2009) has stated that by participating in a CFG, the members can focus on weekly observations and organized meetings with set agendas. Members have felt comfortable to discuss personal issues, student difficulties, and stressful situations that affect their instruction. It has developed the feeling of sink and swim together among the teachers. CFG has been able to bring the teachers having diversities into the same table for critical discussion with the help of mutual trust and harmony for collective learning. Teachers perceive CFG as a best group where they can learn the lesson of respecting others, cooperating with others for learning the best practices that other teachers are exercising. In this regard, T2 and T4 said that,

> *CFG has created the platform for being together and has critical discussion collaboratively by respecting each other. Even the teachers having different attitudes, styles, personality, thinking levels, emotional aptitude, ability, socio-cultural background come in a common ground, show respect and honesty towards each other despite their different castes, religions, socio-economic statuses.*

> *Generally we people prefer to regard ourselves as all in all and our ideas or practices are the best ones. But the CFG has proved it wrong; others' ideas are also very important for our personal, social and professional development. It means it has taught me how to respect others' ideas and practices in order to develop self as a co-operative teacher.*

From observation it is found that the present scenario shows the rate of teachers turn-over very high because of the professional isolation and lack of mutual understanding and respect between the teacher and administration staff. In such condition if we form the group like this, we can grow personally, socially and professionally by enhancing the feeling of mutual trust and respect towards each-other.

CFG encourages for on and in Reflection

Reflection is all about reviewing the acts that we do during our life span that might be past or present. It gives feedback to the reviewer for better improvement. Reflection is a trait necessary for development in teaching profession (Pollard 2002, Russell, 2005) and one way to develop this is through communities of practice or involvement in CFGs. CFG is about revising the discussion of the previous and of that very day. CFG has worked as a mirror for peeping out at ones' strengths and weaknesses by reviewing the past and by analyzing the present situation. CFG has encouraged the teachers for reflecting on the past activities for better performances in the present by learning the

lesson from it and in action reflection to make the teachers critical practitioners by analyzing and handling the present situation. In this regard descriptions, during in-depth interview, T4 and T3 opined that,

> *CFG has created an environment for learning to reflect and shape the ideas for better improvement. In this group I experienced that the actions should not go blindly but we should reflect back to see or make forth plan. It works as a mirror.*

> *Well, I think, CFG is that group where we can get exposure to exercise our mind for reflecting in our actions such as what is done and why it is done and for what it is done. So reflecting on action and in action is the essential quality that every teacher needs to have for professional growth.*

From observation it is found that CFG has encouraged teachers to reflect on their practices and in their teaching methods, techniques, styles and strategies. They have claimed that they have got the insight about the impact of the past methodologies they have adopted in their teaching and learning and what they can do for further improvement.

CFG as a Professional Support for Personal and Social Development

CFG is itself a critical professional community where one teacher supports for personal and social development of another. The theoretical foundation for CFG is that teachers learn to collaborate by participating in professional development activities, and this participation leads to greater reflection on teaching techniques supporting a change in practice that aims at improving student achievement (Vo & Nguyen, 2010). It is critical collaborative practice where critical discussion takes place for arguing what is right rather than who is right. They say that they have learnt conflict management skill, group and pair work skills, communicating skills and critical thinking skills. Regarding the above mentioned explanations, T1 replied that,

> *Of course, CFG is the context where I have got green signals for my professional career along with personal and social skills. It has taught me how to work in professional group, how to accept others' views and how to use others ideas for self-development, how to give and take critical comments and feedback, how to respect the sentiments of others for collegial relationship in professional life.*

From the researcher's observation, it is found that CFG has been able to tie up all the participants in a single rope despite their variation in terms of caste, religion, sex, ethnicity, level, interest and age, and socio-economic status. It is because all the teachers work together up to forty-five days, they take part in different discussions, and they get to know each other's difficulties and ways to get rid of that for personal, social and

professional development. CFG is the only group that has helped to develop the sense of helping and rescuing each other.

CFG as a Form of De-privatization of Practice

The members of CFG opine that they are free to exchange the subject matter that they have learnt. Nothing remains secret there in the group. It has provided them the chance to practice the theory and to theorize what they have been practicing in their day to day teaching and learning process. Louis and Kruse (1995) define de-privatization of practice: "Teachers within professional communities practice their craft openly" (p. 31). "By sharing practice 'in public,' teachers learn new ways to talk about what they do, and the discussions kindle new relationships between the participants" (p. 2). Teachers always prefer freedom rather than imposition about what they have to do and what they don't have to do. And they want to have their voices and concerns heard by those police makers. In this regard T3 and T5 said that,

> *"CFG is the best group to practicing the theory and to theorize what they have practiced in real life situation by discussing with their colleagues teaching the same subject in different level."*

> *"There is no imposition from anyone as we all contribute for discussion. All the members are supposed to expose what they have found new regarding certain subject matter. Everything becomes public."*

From observation, it is found that teachers share their practice openly with each other. If they find any of the practice better, they conduct discussion on such practices for further improvement. The open discussion directs them towards developing a kind of close relationship for learning and sharing.

Conclusion

This study focused on perceptions of all the teachers who conceived CFG as a best platform for their personal, social and professional development. Having participated in CFG, the teachers should be able to realize the value of professional learning communities and networking for learning and sharing. The members of CFG have always perceived it as a safe place for exchanging their career related problems and difficulties. Moreover, they should show their willingness to form the network across their schools for updating themselves with new and innovative teaching learning styles, strategies, methods and techniques.

Critical friends Group should help to enhance professionalism on the part of teachers and cultivate the sense of mutual trust and understanding between and among the colleagues. It has also given them a vision to theorize whatever they have practiced in their day to day teaching and learning processes. It has enhanced the critical thinking and reflective

skills of teachers on their methods, techniques, styles and strategies that they had used in their teaching and learning facilitation process. That CFG itself is professional networking within an institution where we can meet regularly face to face and can have better discussion. It has become the ground for working together to obtain the shared goals of an institution by making all the group members equally responsible to perform the assigned tasks. From the researcher's observation, it is revealed that this group has been very useful to understand that through collaboration we could reach the summit of success.

ELT teachers become familiar with various professional networking like critical friends group, teachers' support group with the help of training, seminar and workshop that will encourage them to know the value of professional networking for their professional development. The school administration should create a proper atmosphere for promoting collaborations among the teachers for effective teaching and learning facilitation process. Teachers must cultivate the habits of showing respect and honesty towards each other despite their different castes, religions, socio-economic statuses, different attitudes, styles, personality, thinking levels, emotional aptitude, ability, and socio-cultural background for harmonious relations between them. The teachers have to reflect in and on their activities regularly for continuing the better practices and for improving their professional life. Moreover, they should know the fact that no one will help them for growing personally, professionally and socially except themselves. They should learn to share their best teaching and learning facilitation processes openly with each other by conducting regular discussion for institutional progress.

From the findings of this study, the concerned authorities should be able to draw insights for the successful implementation of the TPD trainings. Moreover, the findings should be able to establish guidelines to improving the classroom practices of the English teachers and increasing the transfer of training.

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