

# How Can Language Teachers Develop Their Professional Competence?

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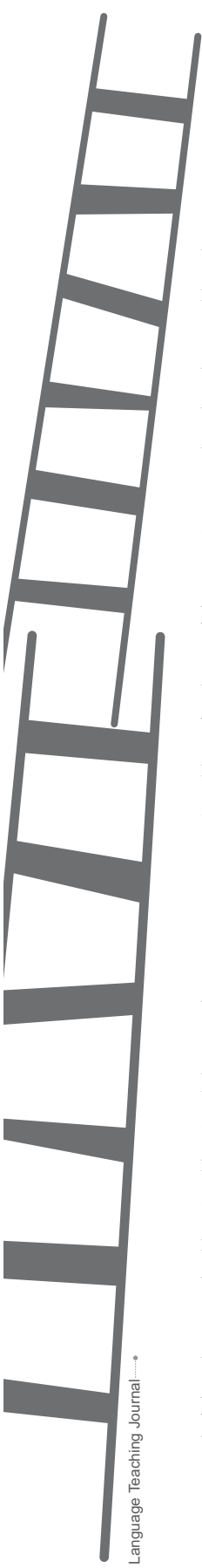
**چکیده:** معلمان زبان انگلیسی باید دارای مهارت‌ها و دانش فراوانی در رشته‌ی خود باشند. به نظر می‌رسد روش‌های گذشته و معلمان سنت‌گرا دیگر نمی‌توانند جوابگوی نیازهای به سرعت در حال تغییر دانش‌آموزان باشند. اما معلمان زبان چگونه می‌توانند خود را با نیازهای متغیر فراگیران وفق دهند؟ پاسخ این سؤال ارتقای حرفه‌ای یا ارتقای شغلی است. ارتقای حرفه‌ای تنها با مفاهیمی مانند دوره‌های ضمن خدمت و یا کارگروه‌های آموزشی محدود نمی‌شود؛ بلکه علاوه بر موارد بالا می‌توان آن را فرایندی دائمی، انفرادی یا جمعی به‌شمار آورد که از طریق آن معلمان می‌کوشند تا دانش و مهارت‌های خود را با نیازهای دانش‌آموزان تطبیق دهند. اقدام‌پژوهی، گروه‌های مطالعاتی، و آموزش متقابل همکاران از جمله راهکارهای ارائه شده است که می‌تواند معلمان را در راه کسب مهارت حرفه‌ای یاری بخشد.

**کلید واژه‌ها:** ارتقای حرفه‌ای، دانش حرفه‌ای، اقدام‌پژوهی، گروه‌های مطالعاتی، آموزش متقابل همکاران، آموزش معلمان زبان انگلیسی، آموزش معلمان

## Abstract

Foreign language teaching has become a challenging task in today's world. Language teachers should be equipped with different competencies and skills because their students have access to different and varying sources of development. It seems that students' needs have elevated from what traditional views to language teaching have predicted. How can English language teachers adjust themselves with the changing needs of their students in today's world? The answer is in professional development. Professional development is not limited to getting higher degrees or attending in-service courses and workshops. In addition to including such concepts, professional development should include an ongoing, individualized and/or choral process during which teachers try to adjust their knowledge and skills with students' needs. Some techniques and activities including action research, study groups, and peer coaching are most useful in helping language teachers in their quest for professional competence.

**Key Words:** professional competence, professional development, action research, study groups, peer coaching, teacher education, foreign language teacher.



## **I**ntrouduction

How can language teachers be sure that they are doing the best they can do? It is mostly convincing to be satisfied with an everyday routine in teaching. For many, the term “professional development” is limited to in-service courses and workshops which they usually regard as useless and a waste of time. To others, it is synonymous with continuing their studies (for example getting an MA degree) (Brown, 2001). But in this paper, professional development is defined as “an ongoing learning process in which teachers engage voluntarily to learn how best to adjust their teaching to the learning needs of their students” (Diaz-Maggioli, 2003, p.1). Professional development is not a one-shot, inclusive event, but rather an evolving process of reflection and growth.

Today, foreign language teachers require a combination of competencies and skills which may not be predicted by teacher education programs thoroughly. As well as having to demonstrate different educational competencies, foreign language teachers need to be highly proficient in all modalities of the foreign language (speaking, listening, reading, and writing). They should be able to use the language in real -life contexts, have a great command of formal aspects of the target language like grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation and spelling and be familiar with different techniques and the latest innovations in the foreign language teaching and learning field (Met, 1989).

Considering the diversity of the competencies that foreign language

teachers should have and also the rapid changes in the field of foreign language teaching, it can be understood why the issue of professional development is of critical importance for language teachers. This article to identify the experiences that language teachers need for developing those competencies and to present the resources that are available to help them in their professional development.

## **T**eacher as Lifelong Learner

Just as every EFL learning realizes the fact that learning English is a possibly lifelong and ongoing process, so are language teachers, both as a teacher and a learner, aware of the fact that professional development is long-term and permanent. At the beginning of each academic year, many language teachers decide to devote more time to their students, modify some of their teaching techniques and abandon some others completely, develop their knowledge about English language, language teaching and learning processes, spend more time with other language teachers and try to make more use of their experiences, knowledge and attitudes.

On the other hand, some other teachers may not bother their minds about these issues. For this group, each academic year is just the repetition of what has gone before in previous years after a lazy summer. This second group stagnates in an unchanging orbit because it is the easiest way possible. Some of their usual comments are: “there is no room for change because students will resist it” or “we

are accustomed to a specified syllabus and method and students are also happy with it". Ur (1996, p.317) contrasts teachers "with twenty years' experience and those with one year's experience repeated twenty times".

After so many years of second and foreign language learning and teaching, it is now strongly believed that "the teacher is the ultimate key to educational change and school improvement" (Hargreaves & Fullan, 1992, p. ix). In post-method pedagogy, teachers are not regarded as the mere practitioners of others' theories. But rather, they are explorers the same way that their learners are (Kumaravadivelu, 2006). Teachers should be able to construct their own theories of practice according to the particular context of their classroom, particular students, particular goals and particular socio-cultural environment (Kumaravadivelu, 2001). In other words, teachers can redefine the curriculum and its content, and interpret and transform the curriculum in a way that makes learning more manageable for the learner. As Richards and Renandya (2002, p. 358) state "it is what teachers think and do at the classroom level that eventually determines what learners learn in the classroom."

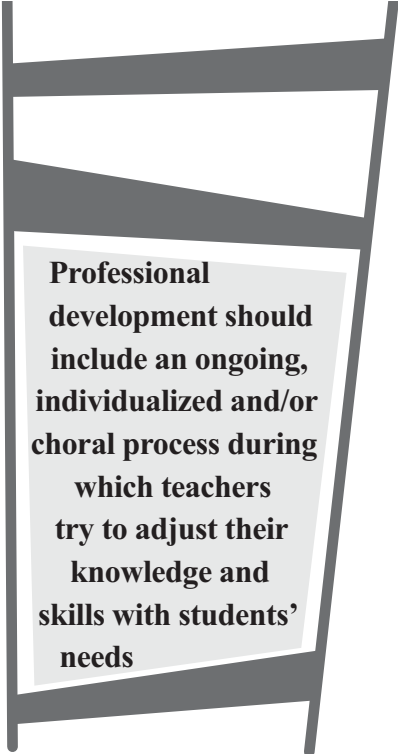
Considering this key role of the teacher, it is essential that teachers develop constantly not only their knowledge of the subject matter, but also their knowledge of pedagogy. Hence, the issue of professional growth is highly important and critical especially for language teachers. Development may be regarded as a move from our fixed teaching

rules and principles or as a way of challenging what we have taken for granted. It may involve using new ideas or changing the way we use old ones. It may involve investigating something that confuses us or that we do not know about.

But in all these approaches, our intention is not only to improve our own performance, but also to learn more about teaching and learning (Harmer, 2001). In general, all teachers should involve themselves in a lifelong developing of their professional competence. As Pettis (2002) proposes it is our professional responsibility to continually undertake a wide range of activities to improve our teaching competence.

## **W**ays to Improve Professional Competence

Participant involvement and personal choice are key characteristics of successful professional development programs and activities. Although traditional professional development strategies like one-shot workshops or in-service courses can be useful for delivering information, they are limited regarding the type of opportunities they provide for teachers for transferring theoretical knowledge to effective classroom practices. Rather, efficient professional development provides opportunities



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for language teachers to select, plan, carry out and evaluate the professional development activities according to their needs. When teachers have the chance to participate collaboratively in the creation and implementation of professional development activities, they develop ownership over the learning process and their learning is more likely to promote students' success.

Pettis (2002) emphasizes three important areas in professional growth of language teachers: first, to be professional, teachers must constantly update their knowledge about language and language learning. They should also be able to transform their knowledge into practice. Second, teachers' professional needs and interests should change as they progress through their career. Finally, professional development requires personal commitment and choice. Unless the teacher himself or herself is willing to grow professionally and accomplish excellence, even the best in-service courses and workshops are useless.

Richards and Farrell (2003) also propose ten different techniques for the development of professional competence in language teachers. These techniques include: self-monitoring (reflecting on one's own teaching process), support groups, journal writing, classroom observation (one's own or other peers' classes), teaching portfolios (writing freely about our teaching processes), analysis of critical teaching and learning incidents (individually or

collaboratively in study groups), case study, peer coaching (a type of observation which will be explained in detail below), team teaching, and action research.

Many teachers change their professional lives by attending in-service training programs and workshops, by studying for higher teaching qualifications, or by continuing their studies through getting an MA in TEFL or linguistics. Although such formal training offers opportunities for promotion, more tangible, practical techniques are needed to help language teachers' growth and enhancement. Below are some of the most useful and practical strategies that can make development more attainable for language teachers.

### **1. Action Research**

Action research or classroom research involves a teacher or groups of colleagues involved in diagnosing a situation, reflecting on that diagnosis, and planning and carrying out an intervention in order to improve the current situation. Taylor (2002) identifies classroom research as an important way for teachers to develop their professionalism. Teachers can develop a deeper understanding of what goes on in their classroom and this can in turn become the basis for improving their instructional practice. She identifies the major stages of action research as generating a meaningful research question, finding out what other people have found about the intended problem, collecting, analyzing, and interpreting the data and

finally reporting the results. She suggests that teachers should start with small, achievable projects, those that are related to their daily classroom issues; for instance, how to increase student participation in class, or how to get students motivated. After gaining enough experience and confidence, teachers can move on to larger and more complicated research projects.

Modern approaches to second and foreign language teaching demand every teacher to assess his or her own classroom and to design instrumental techniques that work best under those particular conditions, for those particular learners, and following particular goals (Brown, 2001). In other words, the teacher is the only person who can diagnose his or her classroom's problems. Action research is generally carried out not to fulfill a thesis requirement or to publish a journal article but rather to improve our understanding of the teaching-learning process in the classroom. Nunan (1989) categorizes four areas which can best be studied through classroom research by language teachers: the developmental features of learner language, interaction in the second language, classroom tasks and learning strategies.

In general, it can be concluded that action research is the best way available to teachers for professional development. By doing classroom research or action research, teachers are able to solve problems that are unique to their own classrooms, deepen their understanding of the learning-teaching processes, and

enhance their professional competence.

## 2. Teachers' Collaboration

Professional development is a process is a process that can hardly be accomplished alone. What can we do in order to help ourselves and our colleagues in our quest for excellence? Teaching a foreign language is such a challenging and rapidly-changing discipline that professional development should necessarily be carried out in collaboration with other peers. Below are three collaborative strategies through which language teachers can help each other and themselves in the way of professional enhancement:

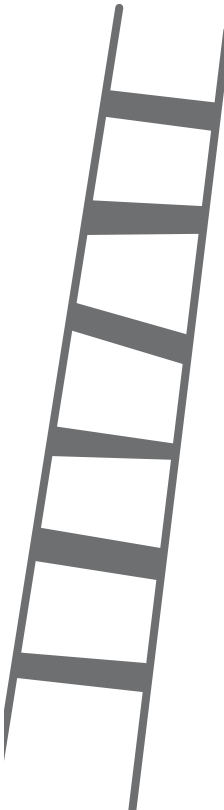
### ● *Study Groups*

Study groups involve a group of teachers who gather formally or informally to discuss some of their pedagogical issues and problems. Curricular issues, lesson plans, teaching tips, evaluation and assessment, professional development literature and strategies and even students' behavioral problems are among the most common issues that can be examined in study groups. Study groups are suitable for teachers who need a better understanding of knowledge in the field of language and language leaning and teaching and those who want to develop a more reflective approach to their teaching or their students' learning. These meetings also provide opportunities for language teachers to interact in the language they are teaching.

### ● *Local Journals and Weblogs*

Language teachers in a district can have their local journal and provide teaching





materials and experiences that are more relevant to the particular needs of the students of that particular district. The outcomes of classroom research or action research are especially suitable to be published in such journals because they are reflective of the particular needs and problems of the students in that area.

Weblogs can also provide an inexpensive, useful, and easy-to-use opportunity for language teachers to publish their experiences and problems, reflect on them, and interact with other colleagues.

### ● Peer Coaching

Peer coaching which is based on the three-phase model of planing- observation-feedback “is a systematic process of collaboration in which one teacher observes and gives feedback to another teacher, usually with some form of reciprocity” (Brown, 2001, p. 441). Pairs of teachers, who have been trained to do so, visit each other’s calasses and then provide feedback and comment on their peer’s teaching. This technique is mostly useful for teachers who need to learn new ways of language teaching or to implement new language learning and teaching practices in their classroom and want another expert in the field to observe their performance.

## Conclusion

Professional development has become increasingly important as a way to ensure that teachers have been successful in matching their teaching goals with their students’ learning needs. In the case of

foreign language teachers, professional development is needed to enable them to help their students develop proficiency in the target language and prepare language learners with the types of skills and competences that are mostly in line with their particular, immediate and long-term needs.

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