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In-house professional development activities to support English language teacher development in remote schools

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Abstract

Professional development (PD) can have a profound effect on teachers' teaching quality and student's learning outcomes. PD activities can take place both within and outside educational institutions and range from formal to informal learning activities, including training and peer teaching. Many educational institutions encourage their teachers to take part in these PD activities; however, not all educational institutions can support their teachers to participate in external PD activities. To address this issue, some institutions, particularly those in remote areas, develop their own PD activities and offer them to their teachers internally. This article aims to elaborate on four in-house PD activities that have been implemented at one private English school in remote Cambodia. These PD activities include: (1) general English courses, (2) regular in-service workshops, (3) teaching methodology courses, and (4) informal collaboration in teaching and learning. The article concludes with implications for future research.

Keywords: Professional development; English language teachers; remote schools; Cambodia

Introduction

The widespread use of English in today's world has given challenges to the field of English language teaching (ELT). The challenges are linked with a rapid shift in its use and users from diverse social backgrounds and for different

communicative purposes, methods applied in English teaching and learning, the increasing growth in using digital technology, and the launch of English policy in countries adopting English as a second or official language (Renandya & Widodo, 2016). These challenges have brought about a number of dramatic changes to ELT institutions that need to change themselves to meet the demands of certain English users. These institutional changes involve updating the curriculum, providing good services, and helping staff, particularly academic staff such as English language teachers, to continue to develop themselves professionally. Among the various institutional changes, teacher development is seen as the most crucial institutional challenge that needs utmost innovation and reinforcement. It is evident that professional development (PD) opportunities offered to teachers greatly influence their professional growth and development (Richards & Farrell, 2005).

In Cambodia, ELT has been growing moderately in recent decades (Keuk, 2015) after English was officially integrated into the Cambodian educational system by the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport (MoEYS) in the late 1980s (Moore & Bounchan, 2010; Neau, 2002). Since then, English has been taught in primary schools (from Grade 5) for around 2 to 5 hours per week (Kirkpatrick, 2012). However, MoEYS continues to face numerous challenges, including insufficient qualified English language teachers (Neau, 2002), low teacher salaries, and limited professional quality (Zein & Haing, 2017). Another major challenge is the inadequacy of effective PD training catered for teachers to strengthen their teaching profession (Benveniste et al., 2008; Lim, 2020; Phin, 2014; Zein & Haing, 2017).

Remote or rural schools have suffered from the lack of qualified English language teachers, which leads to poor teaching quality (Sem & Hem, 2016). In this regard, it has been suggested that Cambodian English language teachers need retraining (Mao, 2013). However, providing effective PD for English language teachers in remote schools is difficult due to the inadequacy of qualified human resources as well as teaching and learning resources (Ravet & Mtika, 2021). In addition, little research in Cambodia has offered insights into the effectiveness of in-house PD activities for in-service English language teachers, particularly in the context of rural areas.

This article aims to contribute to the discussion on this issue. It first discusses definitions of PD before examining the benefits and challenges of PD in remote schools. It then suggests four in-house PD activities applied at a Cambodian private English school in a remote area to promote in-service English language teacher development.

Definitions of professional development

Several overlapping terms related to PD have been used, such as teacher development, in-service education and training, staff development, and lifelong learning (Bolam & McMahon, 2004). The term PD has also been defined differently. Padwad and Dixit (2014) have two views regarding PD, namely the narrow and the broad views. The former focuses on dealing with teachers' problems related to specific knowledge and skills (e.g., using a teaching aid); the latter goes deeper, beyond the knowledge and skills (e.g., critical thinking, understanding, and maturity). From a more inclusive perspective, Hayes (2014) describes PD as all-natural learning experiences, including conscious and planned activities intended to provide both direct and indirect benefits to individuals, groups, or schools. Crandall and Miller (2014), moreover, provide a number of formal and informal PD activities for teachers, including "publications, conferences, podcasts, webinars, workshops, and classes" (p. 633). Notwithstanding all the above-mentioned definitions, it is worth noting that Crandall and Miller (2014) define PD as learning activities that are situated in institutional and non-institutional contexts, which is significant for teachers due to the fact that their constant professional development does not rely entirely on recognized or unrecognized learning institutions, but a combination of both.

Benefits and challenges of professional development in remote schools

PD brings about significant benefits to both individual teachers and language schools. Individual teachers taking part in PD can gain numerous benefits such as improving classroom management (Powell et al., 2003), enhancing subject-matter knowledge (Huang, 2007), and improving the quality of teaching and research ability (Ros, 2014). Regarding the benefits for language schools, PD helps them become successful schools because, through PD opportunities, teachers tend to develop into lifelong learners (White et al., 1991).

Although there is a general recognition of the essence of PD in enhancing teachers' teaching quality, the provision of effective PD for in-service teachers in remote schools characterized by limited resources is a major concern (Ravet & Mtika, 2021). Remote schools face various challenges, and one of the biggest challenges is financial constraints. A study conducted by Seom (2018) in one remote English school in Cambodia found that the school principal really wanted to send his English language teachers to participate in external PD activities; however, due to financial constraints, he could not. Therefore, he offered in-house PD to the teachers to improve their professional competence. This finding suggests that in-house PD activities are crucial for supporting in-service English language teachers to grow and develop new skills. In what follows, four in-house PD activities are discussed.

Four in-house professional development activities

Below are four suggested in-house PD activities that have effectively been applied at Srokstoung International School, a remote private English school located in Kampong Thom province, Cambodia. These in-house PD activities include a general English course, regular in-service workshops, a teaching methodology course, and informal collaboration in teaching and learning.

General English course

The purpose of this course is to assist English language teachers in enhancing their English language proficiency (e.g., reading, writing, listening, and speaking) (Harsch, 2017). A number of ideas need to be considered by the teacher development team to ensure that this course runs smoothly and effectively. First, the teacher development team has to thoroughly identify the school's and teachers' needs and set detailed objectives of the course (Richards, 2001). Their duties are to design teaching and learning materials, support the teacher participants when needed, and ensure that the course objectives are achieved. Furthermore, they need to decide who will be the teacher trainers of the course. Typically, teacher trainers are experienced and qualified teachers within the language schools.

Second, they need to determine explicit duration to achieve the course objectives. The length to achieve certain levels of language proficiency must be clearly established. For example, within three years, teachers' English proficiency must reach an advanced level, or by the first year, they must achieve an intermediate level. In addition, they need to find a suitable time for teachers to participate in the course since most of them are busy with their teaching responsibilities. A study by Sol (2020) indicated that unsuitability of time for PD was the most common complaint expressed by teachers, which potentially affected their commitment to PD.

Third, they need to design appropriate assessments to measure the teachers' language ability and award them accordingly. Assessments such as achievement tests need to be carefully designed to measure teachers' language ability and verify that their language ability truly reflects their levels after they have finished the course. The designed assessments should be used to measure their ability and encourage them to move forward, not to demotivate them. Teachers with excellent or satisfactory results should receive acknowledgment for their efforts, while those underperforming should be motivated to keep working further.

Finally, they need to offer different courses for different groups of teachers. Within the language schools, teachers' language ability is diverse. Hence, different English courses must be introduced appropriately.

Regular in-service workshops

Workshops are effective tools used to promote teacher PD because they are short and deal with teachers' specific and urgent needs, particularly key issues happening in the classroom (Lessing & Witt, 2007; Rust, 1998). Workshops can provide teachers with practical solutions to solve specific issues. When conducting workshops, several considerations should be taken into account. First, workshop topics should be relevant to current classroom issues and teachers' needs (Sol, 2020). When the topics address teachers' classroom needs, they will find what they learn from the workshops practical, resulting in positive impacts in their classroom. There are two approaches in collecting workshop topics, known as "top-down and bottom-up." Top-down approaches are predetermined topics chosen by the management team (e.g., curriculum

managers), while bottom-up ones are proposed topics suggested by the teachers (Wyatt & Ager, 2017).

Second, the teacher development team needs to have explicit reasons for the selection of workshop styles. While there are a number of different PD activities, the teacher development team should be mindful of why they decide to choose workshops rather than other methods. For instance, workshops provide inputs from experts or professionals in the field, offer teachers practical classroom applications, develop collegiality, support innovations, and are short-term and flexible (Richards & Farrell, 2005).

Third, workshops should be led by qualified trainers or experts. Within the language schools, potential people in the teacher development team, such as curriculum managers, senior or well-experienced teachers, can be responsible for arranging and conducting workshops for the teachers. In addition, to improve effectiveness, the number of participants should be limited. Generally, a workshop can be effectively run "for as few as six participants and as many as thirty" (Richards & Farrell, 2005, p. 27). More than this, a workshop will not be considered as a workshop but a lecture or presentation since there would be less interaction between the workshop leaders and participants, and the participants would have little chance to share ideas and comments.

Fourth, finding a suitable time to carry out the workshops is essential. A workshop can be effective in certain circumstances. For example, there is a need to conduct a workshop for newly recruited teachers regarding the school's goals and missions prior to the start of a new term or semester (Richards, 2001). Moreover, effective workshops should be conducted at regular intervals (e.g., once a month) because a particular gap of time from one workshop to another will allow the teachers to apply the ideas or concepts in their classroom and engage in self-reflection after applying them.

Finally, workshops should be conducted in suitable places. Workshops can take place both within or outside the school setting. However, since organizing workshops require workshop leaders and participants to perform various activities, finding a suitable place is necessary. A wide room with well-equipped facilitators such as LCD projectors and computers will allow workshop leaders to design various activities for the participants to interact,

share, and discuss ideas comfortably and enthusiastically. A big room or a meeting room in the language schools can be considered; alternatively, a renting hall is preferable.

Teaching methodology course

Teaching methodology is another vital skill for English language teachers in addition to their English language proficiency. The primary purpose of this course is to equip English language teachers with the necessary knowledge of approaches, methods, and techniques to teaching English (Parish & Brown, 1988; Waters, 1988). Several things also need to be considered, such as the selection of the coursebook, appointment of the teacher trainer, and selection of eligible teachers. The teacher development team needs to be careful in selecting the coursebook. That is, the coursebook should not be too theoretical and contain complicated language (Chambers, 1997).

Regarding the course teacher trainer, he or she must be knowledgeable about teaching theories and how theories are used in practice. Another important consideration is the selection of teachers for the course. To take part in the course, teachers should have a certain level of English language proficiency (e.g., B1 of The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages [CEFR]) (Cullen, 1994). According to the University of Cambridge ESOL Examinations (2011, p. 8), learners with B1 level are able to "understand the main ideas of clear standard input on familiar matters regularly encountered at work, school, or leisure."

For the teaching and learning process, the teacher trainer should allow the teachers to have more opportunities to link methods or principles with their own teaching experience and reflect on the current issues in their classroom to bring about good teaching practices next time (Ur, 2013). Moreover, the length of this course should be clearly set (e.g., either a six-month or one-year training course). More importantly, the teacher development team needs to be aware of some constraints such as time, personal or family commitments, the need to find extra incomes after teaching hours, and other factors preventing them from being able to join the training course (Ros, 2014; Seom, 2018). Therefore, support for teachers such as incentives or pay rise should be provided. This support is to promote their meaningful participation in the PD course.

Informal collaboration in teaching and learning

Sometimes, new teachers and experienced teachers feel reluctant or unwilling to share ideas or issues during formal meetings because they may be shy or afraid that their ideas will be rejected or criticized by their colleagues or managers. Such reluctance will not allow their innovative ideas or concerns to be heard and solved (Barfield, 2016). However, to promote collaboration between new and experienced teachers and to promote the growth of individuals and groups, informal collaboration can be utilized. By informally dialoguing and inquiring with colleagues, they can feel relaxed, motivated, and confident in sharing their concerns with their colleagues (Ahlquist, 2019). Informal collaboration is an effective method of teacher PD as it encourages teachers to work together and learn from each other (Williams, 2003). Collaboration comes in many forms, including collaborative teaching and learning, collaborative research, and collaborative curriculum development. It can also be in the form of conversation, questioning, and discussion which can take place face-to-face, on social media communication, or a combination of both (Barfield, 2016).

Furthermore, within the language schools, dividing teachers into different groups with one team leader can be an effective way to assist teachers who need support. The division of teachers into different groups allows them to contact and approach each other and the team leader regularly and confidently. The assigned team leader usually has extensive experience and training skills to offer advice or suggestions to the teachers to solve problems (Richards, 2001). Another approach is to conduct regular meetings between the top management team and the teacher team leader so that they can report any concerns or problems they face to the top management team and find solutions together.

Conclusion

This article has discussed four potential in-house PD activities for English language teachers that have been applied at one remote private English school in rural Cambodia. Although there are numerous PD activities for English language teachers, not all of them can effectively and successfully be implemented in remote, resource-deficient contexts. Such contexts may require

unique PD activities, and this article has offered some insights into practical in-house PD activities provided to in-service English language teachers at a remote private English school.

As research looking at the provision of effective PD activities for in-service English language teachers in language schools is scarce in the context of Cambodia, future research should address this knowledge gap. Future research can examine the challenges and opportunities of providing internal and/or external PD activities for English teachers in remote or resource-scarce settings. Such research studies will be helpful for teacher educators, teacher development professionals, and school managers, particularly those operating in remote areas, as they need empirical evidence and insights into how to effectively provide PD activities to teachers to enhance their knowledge and skills, leading to improved classroom instructions and student learning outcomes.

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