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Secondary Level English Language Teachers' Professional Development: Perceptions and Practices

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Abstract

Professional development is mandatory for addressing contextual realities and enhancing the professional knowledge, attitudes and skills of teachers. However, in the context of developing countries like Nepal, only limited forms or ways of professional development have been in practice. Considering the reality, this study explored the English language teachers' perceptions and practices in the case of their professional development. For this study, I used a narrative inquiry method. Moreover, I interviewed four secondary-level English teachers from Darchula and Baitadi (two hilly) districts of Sudurpashchim province. The findings of this study were discussed under four themes such as English language teachers' perception of professional development, the importance of English language teachers' professional development, English language teachers' practices for their professional development and English language teachers' challenges in their professional development. The study found that the participant teachers perceive professional development as a process and practice. It was also found that teachers watch ELT videos, read online and printed materials, write on ELT issues and attend training, conferences and workshops for their professional development. Moreover, the internet issue, less issue-focused professional events and a lack of school and concerned authority support were the challenges to their professional development.

Keywords: Professional development, school support, teachers' perception, teachers' practice

Introduction

I attended teacher training for the first time, which concentrated on teachers'



practices for professional development, where the trainer and participant teachers discussed various aspects of teacher development, and they also reflected upon their practices. The issue triggered me, and I asked some of the teachers about their professional development practices during the lunch break. The responses of the teachers motivated me to explore further, considering the perceptions and practices of English teachers.

A teacher is a professional, and generally teaching is their profession, which requires certain qualifications, skills and qualities. Teaching as a profession requires not only knowledge and skills, but also expertise and qualities to transform and change the ways the students perform or act after being taught. The teacher is one of the basic elements of an educative process who not only has the role of the transformer of knowledge but also is functionally taken as the heart of the educative process (Dewey, 1916 as cited in Poudel, 2006). So, if one element of the educative process remains backwards, the whole system could be affected. Therefore, among other elements, the teacher and his professional growth are necessary to maintain the dynamism and effectiveness in teaching. Moreover, professionals who belong to different associations or organizations are involved in different professional development-related events such as workshops, conferences, publications, etc. to update their skills, knowledge and practices (Ingersoll & Collins, 2018). Thus, teacher professional development is required to make the educative process more meaningful and effective.

Furthermore, teacher development is not a one-time process, but it's a long process which depends on the context and situation for conducting different forms of teacher development programmes or practices. It is a continuous process in which teachers' potentials are to be transformed into teachers' performances with the help of different teacher development practices. One programme cannot be sufficient for teacher professional development; therefore, various teacher professional development practices have been developed over time in the field of teacher education and development. In this regard, Diaz-Maggioli (2003) states that professional development is not a one-shot event but a continuous process in which teachers change their teaching considering learners' needs. It also does not follow the principle of 'one-size-fits-all' because different contexts and situations require different programmes and practices to suit the needs. Teacher development has a direct connection with students' learning.

In the same line, Murray (2010) argues that the development of teachers' practices and skills improves the performance and attitude of learners. So, the influence of teacher development is reflected in learners' performance and attitude. Moreover, teacher professional development was taken as a transfer of knowledge into practice in the past, but it is taken as a construction of new knowledge and theory through socio-academic practices (Richards, 2008).

The English language was first introduced and taught to royal family members in 1951. Since then, English was introduced in a course at Tri-Chandra College under the supervision of Patna University, India, and then the first university in Nepal was

established in 1959 with the name Tribhuvan University, which emphasized it in its curriculum (Bista, 2011). Similarly, Timsina (2021) states that English in Nepal is taught and learned as a foreign language from the basic level to the university level as both compulsory and optional subjects. English is used as a medium of instruction in private and many government-funded schools in Nepal because of its use in the global context, employability, and interdisciplinary nature (Ghimire, 2022). Similarly, Paudel (2021) states that English is used for wider communication and its massive use in education has prioritized to use of English as a Medium of Instruction (EMI) in developing countries, including Nepal. He further states that it is a model of teaching non-English subjects through the medium of English. So, the English language is used as a medium of instruction in Nepal, from elementary school to the university level.

Regarding English language teacher education in Nepal, English language teaching was introduced in Nepalese education in 1971 with the implementation of the National Education System Plan; until then, English language teachers were not trained (Awasthi, 2003). The Institute of Education (IOE) of Tribhuvan University (TU) initiated a B.Ed. Programme in English language education in 1971. Thereafter, different universities and colleges imparted English teacher education to satisfy the needs of English teachers (Awasthi, 2003). The Nepal English Language Teachers' Association (NELTA) was established in 1991 by the collaboration of English teachers of Nepal, aiming to develop the professional qualities of English language teachers in Nepal. It has collaboratively worked with different national and international associations and organizations, conducting training, conferences, seminars and workshops for English teachers (Poudel, 2013). These days, different universities, institutions and academic centres are imparting different English teacher development-related courses and programmes. Different institutions and universities, such as the National Education Board, Tribhuvan University, Kathmandu University, Purwanchal University, Mid-Western University, Far Western University, Nepal Open University, etc., have been imparting English teacher education in Nepal. Moreover, besides taking certain courses at universities, English teachers participate in training, conferences, seminars, workshops, research and writing practices in Nepal for their professional development.

Regarding the professional development practices and strategies in the context of Nepal, Bharati and Chalise (2017) explored the perceptions of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers on professional development through a questionnaire involving 40 English language teachers from the Bharatpur district. They reported that the selected PD strategies, like training and workshops, teacher induction program, visiting neighbouring schools and teachers, reflective practice and mentoring, improve teachers' knowledge and performance. However, they also reported that some of the teachers were found to be unaware of some of these strategies. Similarly, Gautam (2020) investigated the preparation of English language teachers during COVID-19 in Nepal by attending various professional development events with the help of a questionnaire from 102

English teachers of all levels. He reported that the English teachers attended three kinds of events, such as technology-related, English language teaching-related and professional development-related events to enhance their technical skills, to be familiar with online resources for their teaching and to develop their professional skills, respectively.

Likewise, Ghimire (2022) studied the English language teachers' perceptions and experiences of school-based training and how training supports them to polish their professional skills. He found a school-based training is one of the best practices of teacher education, having positive attitudes of teachers towards it. Moreover, he stated that it has addressed the needs of the teachers of a particular school context. In the same way, Gnawali (2013) explored PD strategies like conducting events, blogging, publishing and providing foreign exposure chances from English language teachers employed through teacher associations for their professional development. Similarly, Joshi, Gnawali and Dixon (2018) studied the Nepalese English language teachers' professional development strategies and experiences employing a qualitative research design for collecting data from 45 high school and college-level English language teachers of Kathmandu and Lalitpur districts. To present the findings of the study, they grouped the data into four professional development strategies, such as self-directed, profession-related, peer-supported and study-focused. They reported that Nepalese English teachers have positive experiences with professional development strategies. They further stated that the Nepalese English language teachers benefited mostly from self-directed, profession-related and peer-supported professional development strategies rather than the study-focused ones.

The studies conducted in Nepal have examined teachers' perceptions, experiences, and preparedness in relation to specific professional development strategies, but gaps remain in understanding how individual teachers make sense of their growth. This study addresses that gap by using narrative inquiry and focusing on English teachers working in the hilly districts of Sudurpashchim Province. It aims to understand how these teachers view their own professional development and what practices they use to sustain it, guided by two questions: how they perceive teacher professional development and what strategies they employ to enhance it.

Methods and Procedures

I used narrative inquiry as a research method, which helped me to collect and analyze the experiences of participant teachers for constructing meaning. It states that individuals have their own stories or experiences about the world or social situations; what they narrate becomes data for the studies which employ narrative inquiry as the research method. Through this method, I interpreted their experiences subjectively. With the help of this method, the researcher records human experiences from their narratives and explores how humans make experiences about the situations around them (Webster & Mertova, 2007). So, I explored the perception and practice-related experiences of the participant teachers through their narratives.

Moreover, I purposively selected the research site and participants. Creswell (2014) argues that the research sites and participants are selected purposively in a qualitative study like narrative inquiry. Regarding the research site, I purposively selected four public secondary schools from the Baitadi and Darchula districts because they are easy to access in terms of time, cost and personal-professional network. Moreover, I also selected one English language teacher from each school as a research participant, considering the parameters like their school's geographical location, academic background, teaching experience and job duration. I selected only four English teachers because a smaller number of participants helps extract detailed data for the study.

Furthermore, I collected teachers' perceptions and practice-related experiences through interviews. Though surveys, observations, interviews, documents and conversations can be used as instruments for collecting the data from the participants (Webster & Mertova, 2007). Among them, I employed the interview as a major instrument for data collection because the interview can extract detailed information from the participants, considering the purpose of the study (Creswell, 2014).

Regarding data collection, first of all, I contacted with head teachers of my participants to obtain their permission for conducting interviews with English teachers. Then, I visited the teachers and built rapport with them by explaining the purpose and process of the interview. Then, I interviewed them, and during the interview, I took notes and recorded the interviews with the permission of the participants. I provided them required time and freedom to express their experiences. Moreover, I used both Nepali and English during the interview process. Finally, I thanked the participant teachers and school administration for their support and cooperation for this study. In the case of data analysis, I employed the thematic analysis method for this study. Under thematic analysis, I analysed the qualitative data to generate the themes. Moreover, I transcribed the recorded data and read out the transcribed data and handwritten notes frequently for developing codes, and based on the developed codes, I developed themes. In addition, I used pseudonyms in my analysis to maintain ethical considerations.

Results and Discussion

English Language Teachers' Perception of Professional Development

Through the process of teacher development, teachers can get exposure to improve their skills and knowledge that help them sustain in the profession. Teacher development as a process makes teachers more knowledgeable and experienced (Sener & Cokcaliskan, 2017) to maintain their profession. The data indicated that the teachers perceive professional development as the best process for developing teachers, being equipped with the pace of the context and change. They perceived professional development as a practice and process through which teachers' skills and abilities are polished. In this regard, Ram argued:

In my opinion, professional development is a practice of polishing the teachers' knowledge and skills to cope with the changes around them. Professional growth is necessary for each profession to maintain timeliness and improve professional qualities. In the case of teachers, they need to keep themselves up to date by improving their professional qualities. For example, this time is taken as the age of science and technology; therefore, teachers need to improve their technical knowledge and skills to keep themselves fit so that they can do justice to their profession.

His points showed that professional development is a practice through which teachers develop relevant and required knowledge and skills. Moreover, teachers improve their qualities for coping with the changes taking place around them. In the same line, Zehir Topkaya and Celik (2016) highlight that teachers need to improve themselves as per the change in education. Regarding professional development, Riya responded a bit broadly:

I consider professional development as a collective development process in the sense that it is not only connected with the professional growth of an individual teacher, but it should improve institutional practices as well. In my point, only individual growth can not matter a lot in an institutional setting. So, the influence of professional development needs to be reflected in institutional practices and even on students' achievements...

Her responses indicated that professional development is a collective development process by which institutional practices need to be improved, along with the development of teachers. Only teachers' growth without influencing the institutional practices and students does not make much sense. So, professional development not only polishes the teachers' qualities, but also improves the performance of academic institutions/schools (Fraser, Kennedy, Reid & McKinney, 2007). Similarly, Jayanti stated:

In my point, professional development is a continuous process of empowering teachers by providing them opportunities to take different courses and to participate in different programmes, such as training, researching and writing to take a few amply. In the context of Nepal, universities like Tribhuvan University, Kathmandu University, Far Western University, etc. offer teacher education-related courses which are offered aiming to produce skilled professionals. Similarly, different programmes are also conducted for teacher professional development by government agencies, professional development-related associations and organizations. They all have the same motto, which is to empower teachers for their professional well-being.

Jayanti's points revealed that professional development is a long-lasting process of empowering teachers through offering them different courses and involving them in different programmes. Furthermore, teacher development is taken as a lifelong process (Alfaki, 2014), being supportive of teachers in their learning and growth. Thus, teachers perceive professional development as a process and practice of improving their knowledge, skills and practices. To address the profession-related realities and to make a gentle move in this scenario, teachers have to concentrate on professional development activities.

Importance of English Language Teachers' Professional Development

Changes and innovations give rise to updating and improving the practices and behaviours of professionals. English language teaching in the context of Nepal has been in flux because any changes and innovations taking place around the globe influence the attitude and practices of Nepalese English language teachers. As a result, they (Nepalese English language teachers) require continuous improvement and enhancement of their professional knowledge and skills, which help them to empower their practices. Regarding the importance of English language teachers' professional development, Gopi opined:

In my view, professional development is necessary for English language teachers because it helps teachers to maintain dynamism in their profession. It also improves teachers' practices and attitudes... Different professional development practices and activities need to be conducted for them so that they do justice to their students and organizations. Most importantly, English in Nepal is taught as a foreign language so teachers need more assistance for their professional growth... They become familiar with English language teaching methods, materials and resources if they get professional exposure.

Gopi's responses indicated that professional development helps English language teachers to make their classroom teaching effective because it facilitates them with the use of different instructional materials, methods and resources. Teaching is a profession that changes along with the innovations and changes that take place inside or outside the country. Instructional ways, methods, strategies and equipment are constantly being changed and revised; so, only academic qualification is not sufficient for teachers to survive in the field (Alfaki, 2014). Therefore, to be familiar with the changes that have been taking place in the teaching field, the teachers need to involve themselves in different TD practices. In the same line, Riya argued:

Through professional development, English language teachers improve their professional qualities by employing new and contextual teaching strategies and techniques, creating child-friendly classroom environments, developing lesson-focused activities and ICT-integrated classroom practices, developing instructional plans and implementing them effectively, researching English language-related issues, developing new theories through their practices and many more. In short, it helps them to renew their existing knowledge and skills...

Her points showed that professional development is necessary to polish the professional qualities of English language teachers by renewing their existing knowledge and skills. So, teacher development is necessary for updating and revising the knowledge and skills that they have developed so far. The data further shows that teacher development is important because teachers improve their classroom practices. In this regard, Barlow et al (2014) state that teachers' classroom practices are improved with the help of teacher professional development (as cited in Zein, 2016). In the same way, Mizell (2010)

hints that an effective classroom practice is not an accident but an effect of professional development.

Further, Ram and Jayanti echoed in the same way that professional development is important for developing English language teachers' confidence and clarity in their performance. They also reported that when teachers get involved in different teacher development-related activities, they develop their teaching abilities, and these abilities increase their confidence in their teaching (McDonald, 2009; Sener & Cokcaliskan, 2017; Nawab, 2017), and when they become confident, they can present their lessons clearly. They further stated that teacher development programmes also aware English teachers to be strict of the professional code of conduct because some teachers sometimes stray off track, so professional development redirects teachers to follow the professional code of conduct. Only developing professional qualities in the absence of a professional code of conduct makes no sense.

Thus, professional development is necessary for developing professional qualities, improving classroom practices, building confidence in English language teachers and tracking English language teachers in maintaining a professional code of conduct.

English Language Teachers' Practices for their Professional Development

To update and move as per the needs of the time, English teachers need to involve themselves in different professional development activities, which help them become confident and dedicated professionals. Teaching is a profession in which teachers need to change and update themselves to satisfy the students and to improve institutional practices. Teachers should be dynamic change agents who need to change themselves first and work to change the practices of their institutions. To become real change agents, they should be exposed to new practices and manners through which they can learn and let learn others too.

The data showed that the participant teachers of this study practised various activities and strategies for their professional improvement or enhancement while living lived a remote area. In this regard, Ram shared:

... I go to district headquarter every month for downloading my course-related videos and relevant resources... I also attended some training which was related to instructional material designing and their appropriate implication, evaluation system and digital pedagogy ... we teachers of this area especially conduct knowledge sharing programme in which we share our classroom practices and also discuss our classroom-related issues once in a month, but some of the teachers do not actively participate in this sort of programme... I attended one conference held in Kailali Multiple Campus, Dhangadhi some months back where I met different ELT professionals which provided me with a network-building opportunity...

Ram's points indicated that he has been using different strategies such as watching videos on ELT, participating in knowledge-sharing programmes and attending teacher

training and conferences for his professional development. He has only these ways for enhancing his knowledge and skills for his professional growth. Riya expressed her professional development practices as:

I am passionate about reading professional journals, ELT sites and blog posts which are available online. I frequently visit the NELTA site and blog posts for teaching tips and learning new practices. I scan and only read those topics from different sites and blogs which provide practical tips and teaching strategies and techniques... I also write my points relating to the classroom and educational issues on my Facebook page, and also interact with teachers' comments on Facebook... I also write down the reflective points in my notebook... I also watch English language teaching, English grammar teaching and educational videos on YouTube. I frequently visit the CDC website for different resources... besides, I also attended teaching training, conferences and a workshop on ICT in language teaching.

Her responses stated that she has been reading online ELT journals and blog posts, writing and interacting on her Facebook page about ELT and educational issues, watching YouTube videos, and attending teacher training, conferences and workshops for her professional development. The data shows that she is following the true nature of the profession, that is, learning and sharing, as stated in Alfaki (2014). Her way of writing and interacting on ELT and educational issues through social media like a Facebook page denotes her manner as a reflective practitioner (Reimers, 2003). Similarly, Jayanti shared:

I prefer to read teaching-related books to get new insights into teaching. I frequently buy ELT-related books and materials and teacher monthly magazines when I go to Dhangadhi or I also ask someone who is in my contact to take such books and materials if he/she comes here. I have also six journals of NELTA which I got from one of my friends who teaches in Dhangadhi. I also contact other teachers who are in close contact for idea sharing if I face any problem regarding my profession...

Jayanti shared that she has been reading ELT-related books, journals and teacher magazines and asking her friends for solutions to her problems. Reading different profession-related publications and materials is a significant way to obtain new skills and updated knowledge, as mentioned in Zehir Topkaya and Celik (2016).

Thus, English teachers are involved in different practices such as watching ELT-related videos, reading digital and published materials, attending conferences, training and workshops and writing their points for interaction on social media such as the Facebook page for their professional development. The data indicate that teachers are found to be following the self-regulated (Shakya, 2011) and profession-related (Giri, 2015 as cited in Joshi, Gnawali & Dixon, 2018) or institutional (Richards & Farrell, 2005) practices/approaches for professional development.

English Language Teachers' Challenges in Their Professional Development

The participant teachers were also asked about the challenges they face in their professional development. Their responses indicated that most of them did not have good access to the internet for accessing the online available resources. In this regard, Ram shared, "In my area, internet access is not appropriate to search different online resources and to join online professional development events. I frequently go to the district headquarters to download ELT-related videos. In the same line, Gopi and Jayanti stated that they do not have good internet access for performing their professional development-related activities. However, Riya stated, "I access different online resources and materials which provide very insightful ideas and tips for my professional growth. I have also attended some online seminars and workshops on English language teachers' professional development." Except for Riya, other participant teachers reported that they do not have good internet service. So, internet inaccessibility is one of the challenges they face in the course of their professional development.

They further reported that the teacher training is not well-managed and issue-focused. They intend to share that the trainings, workshops and conferences need to be based on the classroom realities, teachers' needs and realities that have been taking place in the domain. Most of such activities are only for knowledge sharing, which are not specifically directed to the teaching issues and realities. In this case, Riya argued, "I attended some training which I found was only conducted for knowledge delivery. The trainings that I attended were not based on the needs of the teachers of a particular area. I found them more general." Ram, Jayanti and Gopi also reported that they have found the teacher training and workshops off track. They also stated that the university teachers or concerned personnel come as experts to train teachers, in which they only share what they have without assessing the issues or needs of teachers who have been dealing with such issues for a long time. The responses seem contrary to Johnson (2009) because he stresses that PD should provide 'a real model of how to teach rather than only advising on how to teach.' They also shared that the concerned authorities conduct different professional development events without considering the contexts of the participant teachers. In this regard, Gopi shared:

... conducted a programme on ICT in education for two days. We teachers from my area also asked to participate in the programme... The concerned authority conducts such a programme which is not so relevant for us because we do not have advanced ICT materials and internet service.

Their responses show that the professional development events are not conducted considering the needs of teachers and the appropriateness of such events for teachers of particular regions. From the responses of teachers, it has been found that teacher development programmes, such as training and workshops, consider teachers as 'knowledge consumers' who obtain 'received knowledge' (Borg, 2015). Moreover, their

responses also support the argument, as stated in Johnson (2009), that 'PD is taken as something that is done by others for/to teachers.'

They further reported that the school administration and concerned authorities do not provide ample chances and incentives for English teachers' professional development. Riya and Gopi shared that the school and concerned authorities are not very aware of teacher professional development. These responses are found in the same line as Bhandari (2013). Similarly, Jayanti stated:

School administration and rural municipality do not organise professional development-related programmes though we have asked them to conduct professional development-related programmes many times... let me share one incident, my school did not support me when I asked for attending the NELTA conference... for attending training also they select near and dear ones..."

However, Ram argued that his school is positive in the case of teacher professional development because they conduct knowledge-sharing programmes, including neighbouring school teachers. His school also allows teachers to attend different professional development-related events by providing some incentives. Positive attitudes and behaviours of concerned authorities make a difference in teachers and in the academic scenario of the institution.

Thus, the aforementioned discussion shows that the main challenges of English teachers are the inaccessibility of the internet, fewer issue-focused and context-sensitive professional events and a lack of support from school administration and concerned authorities.

Conclusion

Each profession requires professionals with high knowledge and skills in their performance; therefore, such high knowledge and skills are only achieved through continuous professional activities. So, teaching is not an exception to the aforementioned reality. Teaching also requires skilled, motivated and knowledgeable professionals who can uplift the status of particular institutions and the education system as a whole. The participant teachers of this study perceived professional development as a process and practice of polishing their knowledge, skills and practices. Professional development is a continuous process in the sense that it cannot be achieved and completed by getting involved in a single course or any other activity. It requires continuous and contextual engagement with different professional development activities. It is also understood as a practice in the sense that teachers need to involve themselves in different professional development activities and also implement these activities and practices in their classes. Teachers must improve their professional qualities, classroom practices, behaviours and confidence in their profession. Furthermore, the participant teachers of this study were found to be involved in different professional development practices such as watching ELT-related videos, reading different digital and printed materials, attending training,

conferences and workshops and writing their points and also interacting with others. The participants further stated that they have different challenges, such as internet or connectivity issues, fewer issue-focused and context-sensitive professional events and a lack of support from school administrations and concerned authorities.

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