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Making the most of both worlds**

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The second issue of the ELTAM Journal is finally ready. Great thanks to the editorial board and all the contributors. We are looking forward to our 2016 conference in Struga in October and hoping for your further contributions.

Editor-in-chief

STRATEGIES FOR CONTINUOUS PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT USED BY MACEDONIAN ESL TEACHERS

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Abstract

In most studies on teaching and learning English as a second language (ESL), the accent is normally placed on the students, i.e. on the students' needs and the ways in which they efficiently acquire the language; the obstacles they meet in the language acquisition process and the strategies they apply to overcome them.

In contrast, this paper shifts the focus on teachers, more precisely on non-native ESL teachers who, in essence, are also language learners themselves. In particular, this paper touches on Macedonian ESL teachers and their awareness of the need for constant professional development, irrespective of whether they teach English at primary, secondary or tertiary level of education.

Namely, the tailor-made questionnaire for this particular research investigates the opportunities for professional development that Macedonian ESL teachers have at their disposal, as well as the extent to which they take advantage of them; it also elicits the strategies which teachers apply not just to maintain but also to upgrade their knowledge of the language (vocabulary, grammar and fluency). Finally, it attempts to shed light on the resources and opportunities which Macedonian ESL teachers believe could considerably enhance their linguistic competence and professional performance but to which, unfortunately, they currently lack access.

Introduction

Most ESL teachers share one common feature - their search for excellence. However, unlike native ESL teachers, who should primarily master the art of teaching, non-native ESL teachers face an additional major challenge – they should master the English language itself. This undertaking, undoubtedly, requires extremely serious, continuous and strenuous efforts directed not only at mastering the language system but also at maintaining high proficiency in it. In other words, non-native ESL teachers, unlike their native counterparts, in coping with this challenge have to demonstrate willingness and determination to withstand two powerful 'adversaries'. The natural process of oblivion constantly erases bits and pieces of their memory, mostly, due to lack of revision or exposure to the language. The physical distance from the English speaking countries also prevents them from establishing direct communication with native English speakers, which has proved to be invaluable for second language acquisition.

Additionally, there are other circumstances which place a number of new and very serious demands on both novice and veteran ESL teachers. The extremely fast-paced technical development incites inevitable and drastic changes in the student population and triggers

unavoidable education reforms worldwide. This implies that ESL teachers should constantly be on alert for the newest trends in the language itself, as well as in the teaching process.

Considering all these facts, ESL teachers are obviously left with only one available and truly reliable 'ally' - life-long learning, i.e. continuous professional development (CPD).

The aim of this paper is to investigate the case of CPD of Macedonian ESL teachers at all levels of education (primary, secondary and tertiary). Actually, it brings to the fore their efforts not only to maintain but also to upgrade their knowledge of the English language as well as their teaching skills. More precisely, it aims to disclose what strategies they use in order to enhance their vocabulary, grammar and fluency; how they feel about going to conferences, seminars, workshops; attending online forums and courses; being part of professional bodies which offer opportunities for CPD; as well as what obstacles they face on their path to self-improvement as ESL practitioners.

In that respect, in this paper, first, we provide some theoretical background on the meaning of the term CPD and its integral components which is followed by a short explication of the methodology used in this particular research. At the end of the paper, we offer a discussion of the findings as well as some concluding remarks pertaining to Macedonian ESL teachers' CPD.

What is teachers' continuous professional development?

In the teacher education literature so far, the accent has definitely been on preparing and training teachers to enter the teaching profession, nevertheless, nowadays, 'there is a growing body of evidence that teachers' CPD has also been receiving more and more attention' (Hargreaves and Fullan, 1992b in Tsui et al., 1996: 461).

According to many scholars the most common and concise definition of the term CPD is the one which describes CPD as 'a continuous intellectual, experiential, and attitudinal growth of teachers' (Joyce & Weil, 1980; Lange, 1983; Lange, 1990 in Tsui et al., 1996: 462). More precisely, teachers' CPD has been described as 'a planned, continuous and lifelong process whereby teachers try to develop their personal and professional qualities, and to improve their knowledge, skills and practice, leading to their empowerment, the improvement of their agency and the development of their organization and their pupils' (Padwad and Dixit, 2011: 10).

The above stated definitions have been confirmed by yet another scholar, Harding (2009), who purports that CPD is continuous as professionals should always be looking for ways to deal with new challenges and improve performance. It is also the responsibility of the individual teacher, since the teacher should identify his or her own needs and how to meet those needs. Moreover, in Harding's terms, CPD is evaluative rather than descriptive, so that the teacher understands the impact of the activity. Finally, CPD is an essential component of professional life, not an extra one (in Davidson et al. 2012).

Evidently, all definitions of teachers' CPD clearly underline its importance for teachers, yet, so far no consensus has been reached on what teachers' CPD actually encompasses. Thus, Hargreaves and Fullan (1992a), for instance, distinguish among three approaches to teacher development. The first approach refers to knowledge and skills development of teachers; the second approach emphasizes the importance of self-understanding which involves reflecting on one's personal and practical knowledge of teaching, and the third approach of teacher development focuses on the collaborative school culture in which teachers routinely support, work with and learn from each other (in Tsui et al., 1996: 462).

Similarly, Bell and Gilbert (1996) identify three main types of teacher development - professional, social and personal. According to them, professional development is the cognitive development of ideas and the development of classroom action and practices; social development is the development of collaborative ways of relating to and working with other teachers; and personal development is the self-initiated development of the ability to discuss and solve their own problems, and to feel better about themselves as teachers (in Tsui et al., 1996).

Davidson et al. (2012: 6), on the other hand, recognize four integral components of teachers' CPD. Namely, they claim that CPD consists of a) developing a reflective approach to your work; b) expanding your skills and knowledge through working with resources; c) sharing and learning with other teachers and d) participating in training workshops and courses.

Having in mind the integral components of CPD, Johnson (2009) investigated the actual activities that ESL teachers undertake in order to enhance their professional development in all its various forms. He, actually, conducted a study among ESL teachers and ascertained that they employ plenty of diverse activities such as: attending sessions at conferences given by experts, or attending smaller, more intimate workshops where there is an opportunity to discuss and debate ideas and opinions; joining online communities which offer interactive virtual conferences, or blogs, forums and discussion boards; talking informally to other teachers in the staffroom; reading of internet materials, journals, books as well as taking part in reading groups; giving sessions which can range from a small in-school meeting where teaching ideas are shared right through to giving sessions at large international conferences; engaging in writing which could range from writing short articles right through to writing books; keeping a diary and reflecting on one's teaching; doing a formal course; becoming a member of professional bodies which provide CPD; practicing peer observation; participating in projects together with fellow professionals etc.

Methodology

As the aim of this paper is to investigate the attitude of Macedonian ESL teachers at all levels of education (primary, secondary, and tertiary) to CPD, we opted for compiling a questionnaire for CPD (see Appendix 1). The questionnaire consists of 12 questions touching upon the four

CPD components: developing teachers' knowledge and skills; building a collaborative climate with other ESL practitioners; developing a habit to reflect on and evaluate one's work and progress, and, finally, attending events whose sole purpose is to provide additional opportunities for CPD.

The questionnaire was distributed electronically to approximately 50 Macedonian ESL teachers, mostly, from the city of Bitola and the city of Skopje. However, considering the fact that nothing obliged the contacted teachers to fill in the questionnaire, except for their good will of course, unfortunately, only 20 teachers responded to it.

Ten of the ESL teachers who filled in the questionnaire teach English at university; eight of them are primary school teachers and two are secondary school teachers. The work experience of most of the interviewed teachers ranges from 8 years up to 30 years of teaching. Only three of the interviewed teachers stated that they have just started their teaching career.

Results

The analysis of the teachers' responses yielded some really insightful and interesting findings in reference to Macedonian ESL teachers' attitude towards CPD.

Thus, for instance, the CPD questionnaire, first, sets out to establish what opportunities Macedonian ESL teachers have at their disposal in terms of CPD and how often they take advantage of these opportunities. More precisely, it attempts to reveal whether these opportunities are initiated entirely by the teachers' zest for deepening their knowledge and enhancing their teaching, or, perhaps, they are provided and imposed on teachers, occasionally, or in a systematic and well-organized manner, by the educational institutions where they teach.

In that respect, half of the informants deny receiving any CPD opportunities from their work institutions. The other half confirms that their institutions help them with their CPD but they also express overt dissatisfaction with the very few and limited opportunities they are offered and the meager finances which their institutions allocate for CPD. In fact, only two of them state that they are quite satisfied with the opportunities offered to them, mainly in the form of seminars, conferences and round tables.

This finding points to the fact that CPD in the educational institutions in the Republic of Macedonia is still mostly seen as a self-driven and self-initiated process. In other words, it appears that it is almost entirely up to the teachers to decide what forms of CPD opportunities they would create for themselves. In this context, the analysis of the informants' responses reveals that Macedonian ESL teachers who teach at tertiary level attach greater importance to both attending and actively participating in regional and international seminars, conferences, workshops and lectures delivered by distinguished linguists. However, they also display keen awareness of the fact that they should equally apply themselves to doing their own research and presenting and publishing their own articles and books as part of their CPD. The rest of the

teachers who teach at primary and secondary level seem to be more practically oriented, though. They put greater emphasis on using the Internet as the main tool for satisfying all their CPD needs. In that direction, they underline various opportunities they find and make use of on the Internet such as e-news, audio-video documentaries, e-books, audio books, electronic newspapers and magazines, Teachers Tube, webinars, online websites for English teachers etc. In this group, the answer of only one evidently very enthusiastic primary teacher stands out as she presents herself as very skillful in and eager about creating a very efficient blend between teaching English and ICT. Namely, she states that:

“Since modern teacher tends to implement the ICT in the teaching and the new approach -learning through games, I created my own blog where I upload all learning activities and share all recent apps and innovations. I also collaborate with teachers from other countries, work on projects together and exchange knowledge. I also use Moodle-which is an open source learning platform and this is how I connect in a global way. I am also subscribed to the EdTech review and web 2.0 tools and receive all educational news.”

The questionnaire also puts to the test Macedonian ESL teachers’ preparedness to take advantage of the latest trends in teachers’ CPD which are conditioned by the newest advances in information technology – online forums and online courses (Chart 1). Almost all of the interviewed Macedonian ESL teachers, unfortunately, profess that they have never attended any online courses or online forums. Only four of the respondents (two primary teachers and two tertiary teachers) state the opposite and claim to have had some previous experience with both online forums and online courses. However, only one of them is very specific about the courses she has attended (*ICT in primary education by Coursera; How to be a together teacher by Coursera; E-learning and digital cultures by EdTech*).

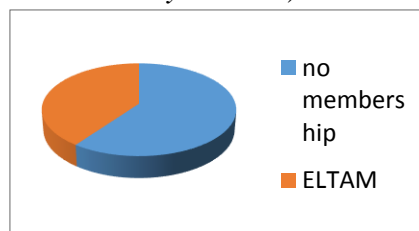


Chart1

Despite being a self-driven process, CPD surely does not happen in isolation. That is why the questionnaire further aims to examine teachers’ willingness to cooperate with other ESL teachers and be part of larger communities of people which share the same interests.

More precisely, the aim is to check whether Macedonian ESL teachers are members of any professional bodies which offer opportunities for CPD (Chart 2). Surprisingly, more than half of the teachers (12 ESL teachers) deny being members of any such bodies. The rest of the teachers claim that they are members of ELTAM (Macedonian English Language Teachers’ Association). Only one teacher states to have acquired an IATEFL (International Association of Teachers of English as a Foreign Language) membership as well.

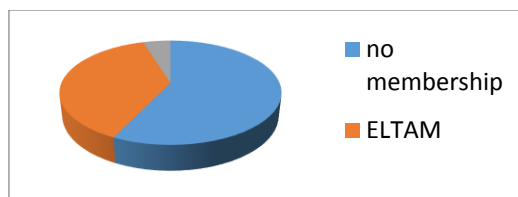


Chart 2

The following question in the CPD questionnaire addresses the incidence with which Macedonian ESL teachers attend conferences, seminars and workshops. The majority of the informants claim that they attend conferences, seminars or workshops twice or three times a year. Only a couple of them state that they do that more frequently, i.e. three or four times or four to five times a year. However, two of the teachers opt for a markedly higher frequency, which suggests that they take their CPD very seriously. Namely, one of them is the primary teacher who is very enthusiastic about combining teaching ESL with ICT and she claims that she attends online workshops once a month and webinars three or four times a month. The other one teaches at tertiary level and states that she attends 3 to 4 conferences a year, four to five workshops and 5-10 online events.

The CPD questionnaire also encourages teachers to reflect on their work and appraise themselves and their progress. Namely, one of the questions invites them to explicitly state whether they feel content or discontent with the extent to which they make use of the various CPD opportunities they have at their disposal. As to this issue, the teachers' answers indicate that their opinions are quite divided. Namely, one third of the teachers simply do not wish to speak their mind about that. This suggests that they are not particularly keen on reflecting on their work and appraising themselves. The other third states that they are not completely satisfied with the extent to which they make use of the CPD opportunities offered to them. They attribute that to lack of time; some complain that, on a regional basis, CPD opportunities are very scarce, whereas some of the teachers admit that they simply lack motivation. Finally, one third of the teachers hold the completely opposite standpoint. They feel that they are investing enough in their CPD and that they are taking advantage of as many CPD opportunities as they possibly can. In this context we single out one of the tertiary teachers' statement:

“Yes. It provides me with the opportunity to keep up with new trends and advances in the field of teaching ESL and to share some of my ideas and achievements with other colleagues. It has a positive impact on self – evaluation as well.”

In addition, three of the questions in the CPD questionnaire refer specifically to the strategies, i.e. activities ESL teachers undertake in order to maintain and upgrade their vocabulary, grammar and fluency in English, respectively (Table 1).

With regards to the vocabulary, the teachers are almost unanimous. They all agree that reading books and journals (online and in hard copy), as well as reading online news and blogs constantly is the main prerequisite for enriching their vocabulary knowledge. Apart from reading, they highlight the significance of listening to spoken texts (mostly TV, films, documentaries, songs etc.). In addition, they all make mention of conversing with native English speakers as a very useful strategy not only for learning new words and phrases but also

for revising the already acquired ones. One of the teachers says that she tries to learn a new word every day and that she keeps her own lexicon. Another teacher claims that she uses premier websites like Vocabsushi and consults online dictionaries on a daily basis to expand her vocabulary knowledge.

VOCABULARY	GRAMMAR	FLUENCY
continuous contacts and conversations with native speakers		
constant exposure to the English language (written or spoken) (TV, films, documentaries, songs, videos on Youtube, books and journals online and in hard copy, online news and blogs)		
learning a new word every day and keeping a lexicon	constant revision of grammar rules by consulting grammar books and articles on specific grammar points	joining online discussion groups and discussion clubs
using premier vocabulary websites (Vocabsushi)	online grammar quizzes and exercises	constant use of the language
consulting online dictionaries	translation	writing activities

Table 1

As to enhancing their grammar knowledge, the interviewed teachers profess that, first and foremost, solid grammar knowledge requires constant revision of grammar rules. Hence, to their mind, consulting grammar books and articles on specific grammar points, on a regular basis is also a must for all ESL teachers. Some of them advocate a more practical approach to maintaining and upgrading one's grammar knowledge. This approach presupposes constant reference to online grammar quizzes and exercises. Moreover, some of the teachers state that constant exposure to the English language (written or spoken) and continuous contacts with native speakers have also proven to be very efficient for enhancing grammar knowledge. Translation has also been singled out as a good strategy for revising the old and acquiring new grammar rules as well.

Communicating with native speakers, i.e. socializing and keeping contacts with people from the English speaking countries, is seen as the main precondition for achieving native-like fluency by almost all of the interviewed teachers. In addition, some of them believe that watching videos on Youtube, as well as joining online discussion groups and discussion clubs could also contribute immensely in that respect. One of the teachers mentions that she tries to constantly use English with both her students and colleagues who also teach English. Two of the teachers go even further and try to establish strong links between two seemingly unrelated

skills, speaking and writing. Namely, they state that what helps them improve their fluency significantly is actually their extensive writing activity.

Finally, the last question in the CPD questionnaire tackles the opportunities and resources for CPD which Macedonian ESL teachers believe could considerably ameliorate their prospects for professional progress, but to which, unfortunately, they have a very limited access. The informants' reactions to this issue, in fact, give rise to several major points. Namely, the tertiary ESL teachers wish to have a more liberal access to professional journals and electronic libraries which they believe would help them immensely with their own scientific research. They, also, believe that more regional conferences, seminars and workshops with more British and American professional linguists should be organized much more frequently. And last but not the least, the education institutions (primary and secondary schools and universities) should invest much more in resources and opportunities for CPD. Thus, for instance, they should establish cooperation with other educational institutions all over the world; organize more teacher exchange programs and endorse more grants for more frequent stays in the English speaking countries.

Discussion of findings

Although a limited number of ESL teachers took part in this study, yet the insights gained from their answers with regards to Macedonian ESL teachers' CPD are rather revealing and suggestive.

Thus, one of the most important inferences which could be drawn on the basis of the interviewed teachers' answers is that the educational institutions in the Republic of Macedonia offer a very limited support for teachers' CPD, or, in most cases, this support is practically non-existent. This could be seen as the very first serious drawback which Macedonian ESL teacher experience on their path towards CPD.

What derives from this research as another interesting finding is that conferences, seminars and workshops as means for achieving CPD are highly prioritized by the majority of the respondents. This is especially the case with the tertiary teachers. However, this should not be surprising, if one considers the fact that their academic careers, in essence, are two-faceted, i.e. comprise both teaching and conducting scientific research. The latter obligatorily requires attending such events where interactions with fellow professionals are viable.

The CPD questionnaire also reveals that Macedonian ESL teachers are not particularly inclined towards taking advantage of the newest forms of CPD - online forums and online courses, even though, judging from some of their other statements, teachers do not seem to shun IT as a means for providing CPD opportunities. Quite on the contrary, teachers seem to be extremely aware of the possibilities the Internet offers to them in terms of CPD and they make visible efforts to utilize them as much as possible. Hence, the only reasonable explanation why they do not make use of the available online forums and courses would be the financial implications of such

activities. The same explanation most probably, at least partly, applies to their lack of interest in becoming members of professional bodies which create excellent conditions for CPD.

Finally, there is at least one more insight gained from this small-scale research worth mentioning. Namely, all the interviewed Macedonian ESL teachers seem to concur that maintaining and upgrading vocabulary, grammar and fluency are heavily dependent on more regular contacts and interactions with native English speakers and constant exposure to the English language. This practically emphasizes the necessity of more frequent stays in the English speaking countries and greater exposure to both the English language and culture on the part of Macedonian ESL teachers.

Conclusion

This paper looks into the opportunities offered to Macedonian ESL teachers as well as the challenges they encounter on their path towards CDP. In other words, the CPD opportunities are obviously numerous, but so are the restrictions which prevent teachers from making the most of these opportunities.

In any case, ESL teachers should not lose sight of the fact that CPD takes place across all the stages of their career and that, irrespective of all the obstacles, they should incessantly strive towards further developing their skills, knowledge and prospects.

The second major point that we would like to make with this paper is that notwithstanding the fact that CPD is self-chosen and self-directed for the most part, yet, it should necessarily be combined with systematic, organized and sustainable CPD programs provided by the educational institutions themselves.

Appendix

Questionnaire for ESL Teachers

Type of education: a) primary, b) secondary or c) tertiary

1. How long have you been teaching English?
2. Does your institution offer any opportunities for continuous professional development (CPD)?

3. What opportunities for CPD do you create for yourself?
4. Have you ever taken any online courses for CPD?
5. Have you ever taken part in any online forums?
6. Are you a member of any professional bodies which provide CPD?
7. Are you satisfied with the extent to which you make use of the various opportunities for CPD? Why?
8. What strategies do you use to maintain and upgrade your vocabulary knowledge?
9. What strategies do you use to maintain and upgrade your grammar knowledge?
10. What strategies do you use to maintain and upgrade your fluency?
11. What opportunities for enhancing your linguistic performance would you like to have an access to more often?
12. Any further comments?

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