



Online Professional Development of Women ESL Teachers in the Post Pandemic Times: A New Stratagem

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Abstract

The professional development of teachers is a unique one and regarded as a collective process that should be accomplished in the workplace of the teacher. Furthermore, it is considered as a contribution to the development of the teacher's professional skills, which comprises a variety of both formal and informal experiences. Research on Teacher development over the last decade, emphasized the need of increasing understanding of teaching. Indeed, professional development has been viewed as a long term process, covering different types of opportunities and experiences that are systematically planned to stimulate the development and evolution of the teacher. The professional development of teachers should be conceived in close connection with a search for professional identity by how they define themselves and others. This paper explores the attitude of women ESL teachers to engage in professional development (like online webinars, conferences, seminars and short online courses) pre and during covid 19. In the pre pandemic times, the female ESL Teachers had to play many roles and these roles demanded their whole time. Since they are home makers with varied responsibilities and priorities, the demand on their time was discouraging, hence, they seldom take part in professional development activities. In the post pandemic times, women who are regulated and controlled in the male designed society, break their diminutive survival role and raise their voices to be heard on the online platforms of professional development. This paper aims at explaining what 'professional development' means in ELT teachers' perspectives, and reviewing what are the similarities and differences between women ESL teachers' professional development activities before and during pandemic times. It also analyses, how the women ESL teachers make use of Online Teacher Professional Development (OTPD) (such as webinars, conferences, workshops, seminars and short term courses), as a new stratagem to empower themselves in the pandemic times.

Keywords: Professional development, English as a Second Language (ESL), Online Professional Development (OTPD), webinars

INTRODUCTION

Women, the key stakeholders of human existence have been traditionally relegated to

subaltern states in socio-economic realms of life. The multifaceted roles played out by a woman in her lifetime gets "regulated" by the controllers in all male designed social structures, resulting in a

diminutive survival role. The position of woman as a mother and wife get attributed and limited by the physical aspects of her existence—namely body, and the same woman is socially excluded when it comes to the mainstream activities of social life. This dilemmatic situation of the “weaker sex” is prevalent in developing societies where gender equality is lagging much behind the economic indices. The modern age has tried to analyse the reasons and resolve the issues behind this subjective predicament in which women still persist.

One of the major reasons behind the prevalent gender inequality is the difference in the economic performance between man and woman. Economic dominance gives rise to a hegemonial role for man in controlling and regulatory powers thus subverting gender equations to his dominance. In today’s liberalized and globalised economic scenario, cultural and social denomination of power has given way to economic factors. Thus to bring about a change in the perception of gender roles is to change the economic contributors. A rampant change in the present scenario can be effected through education, women empowerment and ultimately, securing a job for them. Over the last century, career related to English language teaching influenced both the individual and society in a very positive way which helped the women to grow significantly stamping their mark in their field of existence. This has been due to a big leap in the quantum of global communication, international education, multinational business, human migrations and technological revolutions. In this global context, English language Teachers in general and women ESL teachers in particular have their unique identity in the society. Still, society limits their domain of activity in a particular way of patriarchal power.

Professional development of Teachers

It is believed that teachers are perpetual learners. Assuming the role of learners throughout the career is not their choice, but it is a genuine demand by the profession. There is currently a considerable amount of research indicating that the quality of teachers and the way they teach is the most important factor in explaining student results.

OCDE (2005) report emphasized the role of teachers in the teaching learning process. There is also considerable evidence that teachers vary in their efficacy. The differences in the results of students are often greater within the same school than among different schools. Teaching is a demanding job and not everyone is capable of being an effective teacher and keeping up such standards over time” (p. 12). This report view that teachers play an inevitable role in the education process, it also reflects on the quality of teachers, making the teacher profession an attractive one, maintaining the best teachers in the educational system and directing and ensuring continuous learning throughout their careers. It is stated that “in every nation there is an emerging consensus that teachers have a significant impact on student learning and school efficacy” (Cochran--Smith & Fries, 2005, p. 40). Along the same lines Darling-Hammond (2000) stated that student learning “depends, primarily, on what teachers know and what they can do”. To assimilate the dynamic environment such as the explosion of knowledge, scientific advancement, development of technology, political ideologies, change in the perception of learners about aim and roles of education, learner autonomy, change in the teacher-centred classroom to learner-centred, learner priorities in the classroom process, a teacher has to update his/her knowledge, skills, techniques, etc. A teacher needs to make attempts to grow along with these changes to be able to meet the challenges of their profession. Hence, teacher Professional Development plays a key role in fostering teaching quality. “The professional development of teachers is a broad area which includes any activity or process intent on improving dexterity, attitudes, understanding or involvement in current or future roles” (Fullan, 1990, p. 3); “It is defined as the entire process that improves knowledge, dexterity or teacher attitudes” (Sparks & Loucks--Horsley, 1990, pp.234-235); “It implies the improvement of control skills of the actual working conditions, a progression of professional status within the teaching career” (Oldroyd & Hall, 1991, p. 3); “The professional development of teachers includes all the experiences of natural learning as well as the more planned and conscious ones which try, both directly

and indirectly, to benefit individuals, groups or schools and which contribute to improving the quality of education in the classroom. In professional development, teachers involve individually or accompanied, assess and regenerate themselves and their commitment as agents of change, with moral teaching aims. Moreover, they try to obtain and develop their knowledge, prowess and emotional intelligence that are indispensable to professional thinking, designing and practice. Nunan defines the term professional development as the process of continual, intellectual, experiential and attitudinal growth of teachers(28). Michael Fullan describes it as the “sum total of formal and informal learning experiences throughout one’s career from pre- service teacher education to retirement. Professional development can be accessed in many different forms-workshops, degrees, course work, conferences, training sessions, teacher communities, teacher associations, online podcasts, discussion boards, classes or can be informal chats with colleagues.

Role of Teacher development communities

Teachers often confront several problems once they commence their classroom teaching. At times, they need support from mentors, peer teachers and academic experts to repair and solve their classroom issues. Often, it is not easy to get counsels from mentors and academic experts, at that juncture, there will be a tendency to share the feelings among people with genuine interest. Listening, discussing, analyzing and interpreting the teaching learning situations with someone who shares the same expectations and experiences can bring new ideas and innovations inside the classroom. Rudduck referred to the professional development of the teacher as “the teacher’s ability to maintain the curiosity of the class; to identify significant interests in the teaching and learning processes; to value and seek dialogue with experienced colleagues as a source of support in the analysis of situations” (Rudduck, 1991, p. 129). His point of view accentuates the need to inculcate constant inquiry and probing its solution as a hallmark in the professional development of teachers.

Networking of English ESL Teachers

At the outset, teacher development groups in the ELT gained momentum in the mid 1980s to increase collaboration, counter isolation and raise better performance of teachers and improve the teaching-learning process. According to Davis (1999:5) there are three essentials in Teacher Development Group (TDG)

- i. a peer group that sets the agenda
- ii. initiated by teachers for themselves
- iii. Breaks the isolation of teaching due importance to individuals writing and giving seminars

These groups help in conducting informal decisions about teaching learning. Teachers can discuss freely regarding teaching related issues, break isolation, enhance quality of teaching learning, address reflective teaching, promote inquiry related to teaching-learning. The members get confidence when they are involved in such groups, hence, it is mutually rewarding.

Teacher Association and Professional Development

Teacher-network is a professional community of teachers working together to improve students’ achievement (Richards, et al, 1992: 245). Teacher networks could also be in the forms of English Teacher Association Meetings which may be held monthly or bi-monthly. This is an English teacher meeting to discuss and do activities relating to their profession, for examples, lesson plans, evaluation, and other important issues. English teachers can network with other English teachers by joining ELT organizations, reading ELT journals, writing/exchanging electronic pen-pals, and giving online-mentoring for English teachers. Nowadays, more and more teaching organizations are joining the online community every day for teacher development (Teeler, 2000:17) and many professional journals and newsletters offer selections from the latest issue over the web. Teachers might use online teaching publications (Teeler, 2000:19). Teacher-network may promote collaborations between teachers (Corcoran, 1995).

Online Professional Development (OPD)

In OPD, teachers make use of online platforms or digital tools to update themselves. It is not a new one. It has been there over the past twenty years because of the development of and access to the internet and online resources. Therefore, the who, what and why of TPD have not changed significantly but the where, when and how have changed. It changed drastically in the post pandemic times. There are a number of online workshops, national, international seminars, conferences and discussions are held during the pandemic period. During this period, above 75% of women ESL teachers have been participating wholeheartedly in these programmes.

Professional development of Women ESL teachers in the Pre pandemic Times

In the pre pandemic times, the female ESL teachers had to play many roles and these roles required or absorbed their time. Moreover, these homemakers with varied responsibilities and priorities, the demand on their time was really discouraging. They didn't get enough time to move from their home and work place to enrich their professional development.

Online Platforms for Professional Development

Several studies have reported that the main reason for not engaging in traditional professional development is due to time constraints, lack of motivation from the institution, lack of interest, and lack of support from the experts. The remarkable feature of engaging in online TPD is the participants can attend these from their comfort own home, workplace, or even while in motion, via mobile phones. Immediacy and flexibility, cost-effectiveness are the chief characteristics of this platform. It is true that teachers can save their time by not having to travel physically to engage in their TPD. Concerning the growing popularity of digital PD, Bates et al. (2016) identified elements in which the digital experience benefits participants: immediate solutions to pedagogic problems, external expertise, availability of digital resources and cheaper access but equivalent quality. Additionally, two modes of digital PD were classified:

synchronous (real-time interaction) and asynchronous (delayed interactions, happening in different times for different participants) (Bates et al., 2016). According to Moore et al., the online conference attendees positively adopted the affordance of synchronous text-based interactions in the digital training environment: "Text chat discourse is at once complex and multifunctional, yet highly cohesive and meaningful" (p. 202). Among various forms and modes of continuous professional development (PD), attending workshops or conferences is an important activity (Borg, 2014; Wyatt & Ager, 2017). Borg (2014) verified the multifold benefits for attendees: expanding repertoires of English Language Teaching (ELT) techniques, participating in a network of professionals, and promoting professionalism. Nevertheless, the cost of attending conferences has left communities in some regions marginalized (Canagarajah, 2012), Online professional development platforms provide the unique prospects to foster reflection, deep thought, and analysis.

ELTAI

It is the largest Network of Teachers of English in India (An Associate of IATEFL, UK), having their headquarters in Chennai. They host annual conferences and regional conferences on particular areas relevant to improve the teaching learning process in ELT. National and international delegates attend the programme, present papers and conduct workshops. We bring out "The Journal of English Language Teaching", a bi-monthly, given to its members. This association offers Teacher training packages and organizes bi-monthly meetings. During Pandemic, ELTAI conducted an online Webinar Series for enhancing interest in teaching methods, methodologies, techniques, strategies etc. They held 17 webinars for teachers with an aim to empower them in their profession. In ELTAI online webinar Series, more than 80% women ESL teachers participated.

ELTIF

English Teachers Interaction Forum (ELTIF) is a voluntary teacher forum, having their headquarters in Kerala, working for the

empowerment of teachers and learners of English language, with a special focus for the rural village. ELTIF has organized more than 500 programmes for students, teachers and parents in various parts of the country. ELTIF gives prime importance to the individual professional developmental needs of language teachers and academic needs of language learners. During the pandemic they also decided to host webinars fortnightly. Here also, the representation of women ESL teachers are increased due to Covid 19 lock down.

Moreover, ELTAI and ELTIF

- offer a platform for teachers of English to meet periodically and discuss problems relating to the teaching of English in India.
- Support teachers to interact with educational administrators on matters relating to their profession and disseminate information in the ELT field among ESL teachers.
- help ESL teachers to undertake innovative projects aimed at the improvement of learners' proficiency in English.
- provide a unique platform among teachers of English at primary, secondary and university levels and
- Help in promoting professional excellence among its members.

TESOL Association

TESOL, an international association of teachers, offers membership to anyone involved in the field of English language teaching. It is an international platform for teachers where they can meet teachers from the whole world. If you are a teacher, student, teacher educator, administrator, researcher, consultant, materials writer, or curriculum developer, TESOL International Association provides a global and collaborative community where the teachers can grow personally and professionally.

They conduct virtual seminars, online courses, symposium, regional conference and certificate programmes for free and discounted rates for its members. Pandemic period materialized

women ESL teachers' desire to be a part of TESOL interest group and participate on the online programmes with an intention to enhance their skills and strategies.

British Council

The British Council, the UK's international organization stands for cultural relations and educational opportunities. This association has roots in six continents and over 100 countries, bringing international opportunities to learn, share both for the English teachers and learners. They conducted a series of webinars for teachers during the pandemic. Most of the participants are women ESL teachers

Online platforms to learn short new courses

Coursera, EDX, Udemy, Future Learn are some of the major online platforms for learning. On these, the teachers get opportunities to reflect their teaching and explore the new dimensions for enhancing their qualities. Women ESL teachers, nowadays are enrolling using such courses and making them feel strengthened in their profession.

Conclusion

As the novel corona virus rages its incessant war with human beings, dramatic changes took place in how people live, learn, interact and cooperate, Definitely, these changes are unquestionably troubling the whole humanity, it is also opening a unique window through which to observe some positive effects in human life. This pandemic is an eye opener to the women ESL teachers-they reflect on their professional excellence, found a new stratagem. The self motivated women ESL teachers break the chains of domestic chores and engage themselves in professional enrichment as a means of empowering them.

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