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SELF-DEVELOPMENT STRATEGIES FOR THE ENHANCEMENT OF EFL TEACHERS

Agnes Ada Okpe 

Department of Languages, CASSS, Kaduna Polytechnic, Kaduna – Nigeria.

agnesokpe@yahoo.com

Martha Ada Onjewu 

Department of Languages, CASSS, Kaduna Polytechnic, Kaduna – Nigeria.

monjewu@yahoo.com

Agnes Ada Okpe is affiliated with Department of Languages, CASSS, Kaduna Polytechnic and is a principal lecturer.

Martha Ada Onjewu is affiliated with Department of Languages, CASSS, Kaduna Polytechnic and is a chief lecturer.

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Agnes Ada Okpe
agnesokpe@yahoo.com

Martha Ada Onjewu
monjewu@yahoo.com

Abstract

The study is a follow-up to two earlier empirical searches conducted on the state of EFL in Nigeria but with a global relevance. It is born out of a passion to provide impetus to teachers and a transformation in the state of EFL in Nigeria in particular and the world in general; in view of the lackadaisical disposition observed among many teachers of English. UNESCO (2014, p. 9) declares that an educational system is only as good as its teachers. Hence professional self-development (PSD) is germane to the process of promoting excellent English language learning. The paper explicates the concept of PSD, the different strategies such as self-orientation, self-mentoring, peer-coaching, critical incidents, action research, teaching portfolios, teacher support groups, journal writing, among others; beams a searchlight on the challenges of PSD like economic downturn and unfriendly work environment, provides counsel to EFL teachers by enumerating the benefits of PSD which include deep rooted satisfaction and confidence, respect and honour, relevance and growth with its attendant intellectual and material gains. It concludes that PSD is a composite act that enhances not only the teacher but also the learners, learning, the language and the world.

Keywords: self-development, strategies, teachers, EFL

1. Introduction

The concept of self-development for teachers is represented with different descriptions such as Professional Self-Development (PSD), Professional Development (PD), Teacher Development (TD), and so on; but no matter the nomenclature, the kernel is the development of the teacher who is considered a pivotal figure in any educational programme. Hence The UNESCO's (2014, p.9) stance that an educational system is only as good as its teachers. To Bhatta (2011, p.1), teachers are 'the only on-stage actors', among the various stakeholders, whose actions bear direct impact on the learners. They are the nucleus and determinants of the success or failure of any well packaged educational programme. Consequently, their development and total well-being are of utmost importance.

Teachers' self-development entails all that a teacher needs to have depth, to be versatile and efficient in his chosen career with satisfactory outcome for himself, the learners and the society. According to Underhill (1986, p.1), teacher development involves the process of attaining the best that a teacher can be. This process suggests the notion of continuous learning and improvement as, 'what is the best today if not improved upon can become obsolete tomorrow'. On the other hand, Rossner (1992, p.4) suggests that teacher development goes beyond language and teaching to encompass aspects of language development, skills of counselling, training in boldness and confidence-building, computing, meditation, cultural broadening and much more.

Freeman (1989, p.37) marries teacher development and teacher training as two sides of a coin on which teacher education strategies are hinged. He delineates teacher training as comprising what he calls the more ‘trainable’ aspect of teaching anchored on knowledge and skills; while teacher development is centred on aspects that have to do with generating change in the area of teaching with particular reference to attitude and awareness. Teacher development essentially entails developing a positive outlook and sustaining same (attitude) towards the job of teaching and oneself as a teacher. Unless a teacher is happy with himself and his career, no meaningful achievement can be recorded. Hence the total well-being of the teacher mentioned earlier as a vital focus. A good plane with ready passengers and an excellent airport as well as a good weather condition without a pilot, goes nowhere. This is analogous of an educational system.

Attitude and awareness have been identified as crucial elements in teacher development of any kind. But it must be stressed that a positive attitude of a teacher towards himself, the learners, the language and his profession is the impetus that will generate the quest for awareness about himself (his strengths and weaknesses), the learners (who they are and what they need), the language (the new trends in theories and practice in the field) and the context of his work (policies, updates on syllabi, assessment procedures and materials).

2. The Background of the Problem

Going by the outcome of previous studies, the issue of professional self-development for EFL teachers becomes imperative– a crucial matter that demands urgent attention. This study is predicated on two earlier ones titled ‘EFL/EL2 teaching in Nigeria: A choice or charade’ and ‘The Abolishment of Teachers’ Training Colleges and its Implications on ELT in Nigeria’ by the same authors. Also, the general trend in other parts of the globe necessitates the focus on strategies for EFL teachers’ development in a time like this when the English language has become a global language.

Parry (2015) reports that Hacettepe University hosted a programme on Continuing Professional Development (CPD) for preparatory year instructors in 2014, with participants drawn from over 40 universities across Turkey; many of which were introducing CPD to their ELT staff for the first time. This indicates that PSD is a critical matter as this is not peculiar to Turkey. The result of the two studies mentioned above shows that many teachers of English are in the profession as a charade and as such are not keen on developing their professional expertise since it is not a deliberate joyful choice to be ELT practitioners.

Intrinsic motivation becomes apparent when an individual possesses an impetus for pursuing a course. Such innate drive propels one to sail against the tide and explore new grounds in pursuance of set goals. But where an individual is ‘dragged’ into a venture by compelling circumstances, the interest to aspire to break new grounds may be completely absent as shown by many of the ELT practitioners examined. If the quality of any educational programme is as good as its teachers, then examining the strategies for professional self-development of EFL teachers is a worthwhile venture.

3. Objectives of the Study

The study sets out to achieve the following, among other things:

1. Explicate the concept of PSD.
2. Examine different PSD strategies.
3. Enumerate the challenges of PSD.
4. Delineate the importance of PSD to EFL teachers’ enhancement
5. Offer counsels and recommendations for EFL teachers and all stakeholders in English Language education.

4. Theoretical Framework

The study is predicated on Freeman's (1989, p.27) model of teaching which stipulates that the decision-making process should be based on the categories of knowledge, skills, attitude and awareness. Any move in language teaching that is not anchored on sound knowledge and information, the right skills and mental disposition, as well as awareness of the factors and variables in the language environment, will achieve very little or no result. This study is shaped by this model and tailored along its prescriptions.

5. The Mode of This Discourse

English as a foreign language teaching (EFLT) like many other human endeavours is dynamic, always calling for examination and re-examinations in order to keep abreast with time and unfolding circumstances and challenges. The outcome of this process culminates in decision making for adoptability and adaptability of earlier stance. At the time any educational policy is made, it represents the best view of the policy makers but time and tide would unfailingly necessitate the adoptability and adaptability of such a policy. To borrow a terminology from the field of Fine Arts (graphic), the educational policies promulgated at any point in time are the best and in most cases, the farthest view of the policy makers from their 'angle of elevation'. But with time, the visual barricade is removed and the adoptable property of the policies is unveiled, calling for adaptability of such procedures to the prevailing circumstances.

This discourse therefore, is patterned on Freeman's (1989, p. 27) four parameters of knowledge, skills, attitude, and awareness, for decision making. The knowledge gathered from the previous studies as earlier indicated in this paper, is the basis for this discussion. The knowledge in turn, provides insight into the skills of EFL teachers – what they have against what they should have and the attitude of those examined, creating the necessary awareness capable of bringing about positive changes in the entire circle. Consequently, the decision which stems from the knowledge provided by the recommendations is arrived at. This paper is not just descriptive but it is imbued with empiricism.

6. PSD Strategies for EFL Teachers

There are different strategies that a teacher can adopt to achieve his goal of professional self-development, which means that the onus is on each teacher to saddle his ass to embark on the journey to professional excellence. Intrinsic motivation is what counts as the extrinsic type which should come from the employers, government and other stakeholders may not readily be available. And dependence on what is unavailable will jeopardize a teacher's journey to excellence. The strategies discussed here are those that can enhance PSD for a teacher who is determined to sail against the tide. This writer, from personal experience, can attest to the fact that in certain quarters of the globe, even before the global economic downturn that has rocked many economies, those in the capacity to provide motivation for EFL teachers often fail in this responsibility and the resources earmarked for such, are most times diverted through misappropriation or misdirection. In this regard, Shakespeare's dictum of 'what cannot be avoided, should be endured' should be modified to 'what cannot be avoided, should be converted'. Rather, than a teacher sitting down to 'nothing' because he is not extrinsically motivated, he should convert the odd to looking within to bring out what he can do to help himself move forward in his career. Below are the various self-services a teacher can engage in for personal and career advancement. They include self-orientation, self-monitoring, peer-coaching, critical incidents, action research, teaching portfolios, teacher support groups, journal writing, peer-evaluation, and so on.

(i) Self-Orientation

Self-orientation ranks uppermost on the list and it is considered a fundamental strategy for PSD because of the discovery from the different previous studies. The mind-set of many teachers of English, especially in Nigeria and other parts of the globe needs a re-orientation to catch the vision of PSD and to run with. In the study, ‘EFL/EL2 Teaching in Nigeria: A Choice or a Charade’, 40% of the respondents answering the question on their choice to operate as EFL teachers said that they took to teaching English as the last resort in face of non-availability of other jobs; majority of whom have not developed the required enthusiasm towards the career. This makes it imperative to consider Self-Orientation as a PSD strategy.

Self-Orientation entails the process whereby a teacher who has realised his poor attitude to the career, consciously takes steps in the direction of self-education to boost his morale by reading materials that emphasise the importance of what he is doing which is capable of eradicating the lackadaisical attitude that was already imbibed, thereby bringing a positive change. Knowledge they say, is light. This light from reading or listening to relevant programmes on this aspect will dispel the darkness of negativity. Self-Orientation can also be done by associating with people who have made positive progress in the EFL career. This form of association can result to a change of attitude as ‘iron sharpens iron’ and light begets light. The EFL teacher has to do this by himself and for himself. Self-Orientation therefore, is a spring-board from where all other strategies can take off.

(ii) Self-Monitoring

This involves a conscientious documentation or record keeping in form of lesson reports, audio or video recordings of one’s teaching over a period of time for the purpose of Self-evaluation. The teacher keeps track of his language lessons in order to review his strengths and weaknesses in order to make decisions and create changes when and where necessary. The meticulous information gathered over time can provide the teacher with a clear picture of his teaching behaviour and practices for future reference – a basis for an informed shift or change in posture for a better performance of his role as a language teacher.

(iii) Action Research

It entails a careful examination or observation of one’s classroom or educational practice and embarking on research to solve the problems that have been identified. As Bhatta (2017) observes, this type of research is carried out not for theory development or drawing a generalisation but for the sake of application in a bid to find solution to an immediate problem. The cardinal issues in an action research are plan, actions, observation and reflection. Teachers can collaboratively work to find solutions to the problems that they have identified. The steps involve planning, taking steps (action), observation and reflection and if the end result is negative, the process or cycle is repeated.

(iv) Critical Incidents

In the course of language teaching, a teacher may be confronted with a particular challenge, problem or incidents. This is an unplanned or unanticipated occurrence during a lesson that directs attention to certain aspects of teaching and learning. The teacher is prompted by this incident and swings into action in order to find a way out. It is critical due to the fact that it is useful for future reference. The experience of critical incidents can prepare teachers to adequately handle such occurrence or similar situation in the future.

(v) Teacher Portfolios

Teaching portfolios are an assemblage of teaching materials and related documents that teachers use during language teaching and learning processes. They are useful in course planning and presentation, and serve as a tool for reflection in that they are a means for evaluation and necessary feedback— providing an opportunity to reflect and rethink strategies and methodologies, rearrange priorities and plan adequately for the future. The collection is rich due to the fact that it emanates from different sources such as the syllabi, samples of learners' work, reports of classroom research, self-observations and other sources like language departmental reports. They are a rich source of information for better performance of teachers' duties.

(vi) Journal Writing

This means keeping a teaching journal – a form of an on-going account of observations, reflections and other ideas about one's practice of teaching. It can be in form of a notebook, electronic mode or diaries for the purpose of reconsideration for further improvement on previous approaches or methods of language presentation to learners.

(vii) Peer Coaching

Two teachers may initiate a programme of assisting each other in their teaching career. In this case, they take turns in observing each other's teaching and make necessary input by giving feedback and suggestions on further improvement of their performance. They interchange roles as coach and coachee. They are objective in their evaluation of each other's classroom practice which helps each of them to change what needs to be changed.

(viii) Mentoring

This usually entails a teacher willingly coming under the tutelage of a more experienced person in the field. It is a professional partnership between teachers that requires the willingness of the one to be mentored. It is not by compulsion. The one in quest of more knowledge should express a desire to learn. When the mentee is desirous of learning, he keenly observes the mentor and asks questions. This method has been found to be very useful in producing great language teachers. More often than not, each great teacher has someone to point at as a mentor whether the one who is called a mentor is aware or not.

(ix) Team Teaching

In this case, a group of teachers come together to plan, set goals and co-operate to teach a group of students. They may choose to distribute different topics or areas to be taught among themselves. It may go as far as designing a syllabus, sourcing materials, teaching and evaluating students' results. This kind of co-operation enables a positive interaction among teachers with the outcome of each one of them becoming more polished in their teaching behaviour as they contribute to one another's life.

Time and space preclude a further discussion of more PSD strategies but every PSD strategy should overtly or covertly achieve these four goals in EFL teachers. They include a better knowledge of the subject matter, a deeper knowledge of theories about teaching and learning—new trends and innovations in teaching and learning methodologies, a better knowledge of the learners and how best to relate with them in order to make language learning pleasurable and finally, an up to date awareness of the work environment— changes that must take place with regards to syllabi, assessment procedures, materials and educational

policies. A teacher who is professionally developed should not be found wanting in any of these areas.

7. The Challenges of PSD

The challenges of PSD are many but suffice to mention just these three. They are:-

(i) Teacher's Attitude: the remedy for this has already been provided in the first PSD strategy (Self-Orientation) discussed in this paper. If the attitude of EFL teachers remains negative, no meaningful development can take place. It behoves the teachers to consciously ignite the desire to develop themselves. Self-re-orientation and positive attitudinal disposition are the keys to professional advancement.

(ii) Economic Downturn: 'Money answers all things' is a Biblical dictum that cannot be ignored when embarking on a venture that is financially demanding. There is a global economic recession that has affected many countries and many people. This no doubt, poses a challenge to PSD. EFL teachers who can hardly feed may not think of travelling for conferences outside their places of residence or procuring books and other materials that can enhance their development. More so, when a teacher is hungry, he cannot function well or think straight.

(iii) Unfriendly Work Environment/Lack of Extrinsic Motivation: When the environment where one works does not favour self-development, it is a serious barrier to professional advancement. A conducive work atmosphere serves as impetus to the employees to thrive and grow. It has also been mentioned that often times, those in the capacity to motivate teachers through their position and resources fail to deliver this trust.

8. The Benefits of PSD

(i) Satisfaction: Among other things, a teacher who embarks on PSD will reap benefits of deep rooted satisfaction and confidence in himself which brings boundless joy to him.

(ii) Respect and Honour: It is said that even if a fool takes interest in what he is doing, the whole world will stand still to look at him. Diligence pays by crowning the diligent with respect and honour. A teacher may start small but personal development will bring honour to him and announce him to the world.

(iii) Relevance: A man, who has something to offer, will attract people to himself and this has attendant benefits materially, financially and otherwise.

9. Recommendations/ Conclusion

In view of the benefits of PSD enumerated above and others not mentioned, an EFL teacher who wants to be reckoned with must endeavour to stand against all odds and strive towards professional excellence. The challenges are there no doubt, but they are not strong enough to hinder a teacher who is determined at heart to excel; because where there is a will, there must be a way. PSD, as clearly shown in this study, is a composite act that enhances not only the teacher, but also the learners, the language and the society. It is a worthwhile venture in spite of the cost.

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