

Teaching American Civilization Effectively: A Melange of Professional Development Procedures

El-Alia Wafaâ ZAGHAR

University of Oran 2 – Mohamed Ben Ahmed –
Faculty of Foreign Languages
Department of English
Oran, Algeria

Abstract

In today's technology driven-world, professional development affirms that it can open-up channels of communication, assure collegiality among peers, help gain practical classroom ideas, and result in attaining higher levels of learning among the students. A closer inspection of English as a foreign language (EFL) teaching at the University of Oran -2- reveals that such opportunities are not offered and mainly in the teaching of American civilization, which remains till present times covered in the traditional way and is described as being inadequate. This digest proposes an intervention that seeks to redress this situation through the implementation of professional development procedures within classrooms of a population of 2nd year EFL learners furthering their studies under the Licence-Master-Doctorate (LMD) system. This research work aims at proposing a teaching based on professional development strategies that may enable instructors to reflect on their own behaviours and classroom practices, as well as better detect their learners' motivations and expectations. As a major research question, this study focuses on the effects perceived by EFL teachers when incorporating these strategies in their classrooms. To gather convenient information, a case study is carried out based on a triangular approach encompassing questionnaires, interviews, and classroom observation. Results show that the integration of these initiatives helped teachers better liaise with their learners, maintain high professional standards, and ameliorate their students' academic deficits. Given their strengths, EFL teachers are then recommended to include these professional methods in their syllabuses and put them into action.

Keywords: American civilization teaching, EFL learners, LMD environment, Professional development

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Introduction

It is clearly evident that the major role of teachers is to prepare their learners for today's scenario when they have to study hard and compete. To perform such a task, instructors need to be strongly aware of the elemental aims of education as highlighted by Rogers (1969):

The goal of education, if we are to survive, is the facilitation of change and learning. The only person who is educated is the person who has learned how to learn; the person who has learned how to adapt and change; the person who has realised that no knowledge is secure, that only the process of seeking knowledge gives a basis for security. Changingness, a reliance on process rather than on static knowledge, is the only thing that makes any sense as a goal for education (p. 152).

Producing change is then at the heart of the objectives of education, and one of the basic ways through which change can occur in educational settings is professional development. Correspondingly, in today's increasingly digital and challenging context, the need for an enduring professional development in language teaching circles has become strong. In the area of foreign language education, many teachers declare that they need to take on their job-related responsibilities within their workplace and outside their classrooms. They claim that they desire to reflect on their own pedagogical decisions and discover particular areas where there is a mismatch between their own teaching methods and better practices. Being convinced that professional development has to be an ongoing process that is "not limited to any space, institution or diploma" (Cobo, 2013, p. 83), ELT practitioners view it as a process that should comprise acquiring new abilities and information as well as exploring assumptions, attitudes and approaches and the way they affect teaching.

In common parlance, professional development signifies the training required for staying current with changing technology and practices in a profession through ongoing education, and enables practitioners to deliver science education. In the field of teaching, this process can be provided and supported both at the institutional level and through teacher's own personal endeavours. Richards and Farrell (2005) believe that professional development is this educational philosophy which is:

based on the belief that knowledge is actively constructed by learners and not passively received. Learning is seen as involving reorganisation and reconstruction and it is through these processes that knowledge is internalised. In teacher education, this has led to emphasis on teachers' individual and personal contributions to learning and to understanding of their classrooms, and it uses activities that focus on the development of self-awareness and personal interpretation (p. 6-7).

Moreover, the General Teaching Council for England (GTC) draws up a list of recommendations for ongoing professional development in the field of teaching, which focuses on "engaging the individual teacher in reflection and action on pedagogy, the quality of learning, setting targets and high expectations, equal opportunities, planning, assessment and monitoring, curriculum and subject knowledge, and classroom management" (GTC, 2000, p. 5). Similarly, the Association for Science Education (ASE) (2000) proposes a framework which categorises seven domains for development:

- Subject knowledge and understanding
- Pedagogical content knowledge
- Development of teaching and learning
- Understanding teaching and learning
- The wider curriculum and other changes affecting teaching
- Management skills: managing people
- Management skills: managing yourself and your professional development (p. 10).

According to ASE, these seven areas that they named ‘Professional Development Matrix’ should be the focus of teachers to enhance their instruction and to create a more supportive environment that promotes students’ learning.

Professional Development: A Literature Review

It should be recognized that in the field of language teaching professional development constitutes a platform for ongoing learning and significant positive effects on teachers’ abilities, attitudes, knowledge and changes in their instruction. It is a process which is characterized by a number of core strengths and features, among which the following can be cited:

Basic Strengths of Professional Development

Investing in each of the teachers offers them the possibility of becoming more proficient at their tasks and helps them better prepare their learners for promising future careers. Therefore, supporting professional development initiatives presents multiple rewards including the following:

- Establishing a Sense of Community Between Peers:

Implementing professional development strategies helps teachers develop a better working rapport with other colleagues. It also allows ample opportunities for instructors to acquire new knowledge, launch debates, share viewpoints, identify different aspects of their own teaching, and therefore build up strong bonds that may be of a lasting value.

- Exploring a Series of New Teaching Strategies:

Teachers can gain a lot from the process of meeting together, exchanging ideas and discussing their own experiences. In this regard, James (1996) contends that: “The person using group solidarity to support others and to be supported then becomes empowered to act productively elsewhere” (p. 94). Through professional development activities, language teachers can get acquainted with new teaching methods, learn from them and try to improve their own instruction.

- Raising Awareness:

It should be acknowledged that teachers learn better from exploring and understanding the nature of teaching experiences (Schon, 1983; Wallace, 1991; Richards & Lockhart, 1994). Thus, by exchanging and sharing their instructional practices teachers develop greater awareness of the most common and difficult problems and barriers that can be encountered in the process of language teaching.

- **Increasing Motivation:**

Professional development is a process that is intended to serve as a source of motivation that helps the teachers reawaken their desire to produce some directions in their classroom practices and to lead future teacher learning initiatives and projects. Conducting professional procedures on a regular basis allows the teachers up their motivation and enables them to perform their tasks with an avid frame of mind.

Distinguishing Features of Professional Development

Stressing the importance of professional development, Harwell (2003) recapitulates its main features and the key factors that contribute to its success:

Table 1. *Characteristics of Effective Teacher Development*

<p>Context (or setting)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Supports professional development and the changes it is intended to bring about • Is characterized by a shared sense of need for change • Its teaching professionals agree on answers to basic questions regarding the nature of learning and the teacher’s role in the classroom • Its teaching professionals consider learning a communal activity
<p>Content</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Deepens teachers’ subject matter knowledge • Sharpens classroom skills • Is up to date with respect to both subject matter and education in general • Contributes new knowledge to the profession • Increases the ability to monitor student work • Addresses identified gaps in student achievement • Centers on subject matter, pedagogical weaknesses within the organization, measurement of student performance, and inquiry regarding locally relevant professional questions • Focuses on (and is delivered using) proven instructional strategies
<p>Process</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Is research based • Is based on sound educational practice such as contextual teaching • Supports interaction among master teachers • Takes place over extended periods of time • Provides opportunities for teachers to try new behaviors in safe environments and receive feedback from peers

(Harwell, 2003, p. 3)

The current research seeks to help teachers profit from the merits of incorporating professional strategies in their context. Targeting essentially the teaching of American civilization and in collaboration with instructors covering this module at the University of Oran-2-, the researcher proposes the following professional strategies to be integrated in the classrooms to get the teachers' responses about the suggested approach's impacts on their professional growth.

The Suggested Types of Professional Development Procedures to be Implemented

Two types of procedures were carried-out at the individual level (Self-monitoring) and another based on collaborative activities (Teacher study groups).

- **Self-Monitoring:**

Being described as a useful professional procedure to the observation, evaluation, and management of one's own behavior in order to achieve a better understanding and control over the behaviour (Armstrong & Frith, 1984; Koziol & Burns, 1985), self-monitoring has been undertaken through the use of questionnaires and audio-recording. To better document what happened throughout the lessons, teachers were advised to design collaboratively questionnaires to track their teaching with purpose to share their results. They were also asked to activate and place tape recorders in a location where they can record the exchanges which take place during the lessons including critical incidents and the interaction of the class.

- **Teacher Study Groups:**

Viewed as a collaborative problem-solving instrument used by a community of teachers engaging in reflection in that it plays a key role in "providing opportunities for teachers to validate both teacher knowledge and teacher inquiry" (Lieberman & Grolnick, 1998, p.723). This strategy has been incorporated through the organisation of reading groups and topic-based groups. To gather useful information then to apply it in their classrooms to better serve their students' needs, 'American civilization' teachers were required to select articles and professional books to be read and analysed. They were also asked to choose and discuss particular topics of interest in order to determine how content can be changed and improve therefore their classroom practices.

The Research Context and Participants

This research took place at the university of Oran in Algeria, where "the existing arrangements of teacher education are not producing teachers who meet the expectations of insuring both excellence and equity for all students" (Beauchamp & Clarke, 2016, p. XI). This study targeted 2nd year LMD students majoring in EFL. This population was made up of 415 learners (male and female). Five teachers covering the module of American civilization took part in this research work being the field specialists and the people directly concerned with this teaching.

Data Gathering and Analysis

A deep insight into the reality of teaching American civilization to 2nd year EFL students reveals a series of inadequacies that manifest the existence of real problems which call for real solutions. As far as this teaching is concerned, students show noticeable reluctance and a lack of enthusiasm for the courses, they find them annoying and not interesting since they see their

classrooms spaces where traditional lecturing and note-taking are the norm. The teachers complain about the absence of collegiality among peers. They explain that their learners are demotivated, the teaching materials are dated, and the institution does not provide any kind of improvement or continuing career development programme.

To examine the problematics posed here, a major research question is addressed:

- What impacts do EFL teachers perceive by implementing professional development procedures in their classes?

To better explore the situation, a case study approach is adopted in this research to collect useful data through the use of many tools of investigation including questionnaires, interviews, and classroom observation procedures. This approach is utilized because it is considered as a powerful research means that: “investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context: when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident; and in which multiple sources evidence are used” (Yin, 1984, p.23). It is therefore, a research method that enables the researcher to look at the subject from various and different perspectives (Thomas, 2016).

A questionnaire was given to 2nd year EFL students (male and female). This data collection tool sought to get an overview about the students’ needs, the importance of American civilization in their academic achievements, and the changes that may be made to improve the current situation of its teaching. Another questionnaire was addressed to the teachers in an attempt to find out the main difficulties encountered by American civilization teachers when covering the module, as well as their need for professional training to overcome these predicaments. The participants were asked to fill it anonymously offering them a wide room for freedom to express themselves. Pre- and post- interviews were conducted with these teachers before and after the integration of the professional development strategies to get a thorough picture of the current status of instruction, better identify the changes that have occurred after the incorporation of the suggested professional procedures and to determine whether assumed objectives of this study have been achieved or not.

Being a strong data collection instrument used to get a good grasp of the context under study, the researcher undertook the process of observation, since it has been very often used as a method of assessment and an important tool for nurturing key pedagogic skills and teacher learning (O’Leary, 2014). It also helps to get an objective view of the lessons and to record different aspects of teaching practices. The data analysis comprises the learners’ questionnaire, the teachers’ questionnaire, classroom observation reflection. These data gathering means can offer an insightful picture of the encountered difficulties faced by the teachers in their classrooms. The analysis includes also, the transcripts of the teachers’ pre- and post- interviews conducted with American civilization teachers that highlighted the differences observed between the phase that preceded the implementation of the suggested approach and the stage during which professional development procedures were undertaken. The in-depth examination results in three major themes concerning the impact of the professional development approach.

To answer the key research question of this research, the main themes are explained as follows:

1- Building a Strong Classroom Community:

Training in the use of the suggested professional procedures offered the teachers the possibility to find out more about their learners' own wants and expectations, and allowed them to gain an insightful understanding of their differences in terms of learning styles and strategies which urged them to use a variety of teaching materials taking into account the different types of learners. The teachers reported that they noticed an increased participation translated into a higher level of involvement among their students. By introducing their new content enthusiastically, debating some key issues related to the American culture, showing interest in their classes, they could create a more supportive atmosphere and a kind of trusting rapport that is basic in promoting academic success.

2- Teachers' Development of Analytical and Reflective Skills

The teachers declared that all the types of professional strategies they tried to integrate in their classroom were beneficial and helped them reflect critically on their own pedagogical decisions and discover particular areas where there is a mismatch between their own teaching methods and better practices. They revealed that they became capable of identifying their learners' progress and achievements and developing analytical and reflective competences. They recognized that this suggested approach based on professional growth helped to build self-confidence, and to improve their intellectual ability for independent learning.

The following vignette is an expressive illustration of a teacher's personal feelings and thoughts:

“I feel so glad to notice positive effects on my own classroom practices and a sense of professional identity. I want to encourage other peers to try these strategies and engage in more research”

3- Tangible Results in terms of Students' Outcomes:

Before the integration of professional methods in American civilization classes, the teachers noticed a passive absorption of information by the learners. Being guided and equipped with their own acquisition of knowledge, the instructors become more engaged and capable of orienting their students towards a more active learning experience. Thus, as teachers showed transformations, and modified their classroom practices, the whole process has shown noticeable change. This has offered them opportunities to practise collaborative learning and group dynamics. The teachers revealed that their learners have shown good achievement in their written abilities and a better fulfilment orally when tackling key topics on American culture and life.

Moreover, these positive impacts can be observed beyond the teachers' workplace, that is through their participations in international conferences and their researches that appear in a variety of publications. It's worth noting that officials and decision makers have also to be aware of measurements that should be taken to encourage such fruitful initiatives and to sustain teachers' professional growth.

Conclusion

As concluding remarks, the findings reflect a consistency with the reviewed literature that accentuates the merits of professional development in that it allows teachers to identify their knowledge weaknesses and gaps and address them. Further, it sees it as a contributing tool to personal career aspirations and learners' better achievements. This research calls also for a commitment and prompt action from teachers to further continuing professional progress, even if

no assistance is provided, bearing in mind that teaching is a profession that should be motivated by pure altruism and that caring about the best for our learners should be our priority.

About the Author:

El-Alia Wafaâ ZAGHAR is a lecturer at the University of Oran -2- in Algeria. She earns an MA in Didactics from the University of Tlemcen in Algeria. She is currently undertaking a doctoral research in the same specialism. Her main areas of teaching, research and interests comprise Cultural Studies, English for Specific Purposes (ESP), Linguistics, Research Methodology, Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL) and Teacher Education.

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