

# **Promoting Higher Education Teachers' Professional Development through Collaborative Teaching in EFL**

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## **Abstract**

This paper considers collaborative teaching within the higher education (HE) context. It argues that higher education teachers need to be more collaborative and need to develop different methods of peer support. It also suggests that collaborative teaching might be helpful in HE teachers' professional development. When EFL teachers teach or plan a class collectively, they will share ideas, methods, and activities. In the long run, they will become more engaged and will enhance their confidence in their teaching skills and will build the best teaching abilities.

**Keywords:** collaborative teaching; higher education teachers; HE teachers' professional development

## **Introduction**

With the increasing emphasis on teaching quality in higher education, improving teacher effectiveness through professional development has rightly become a necessity.

New EFL teachers frequently find themselves in front of many challenges.

They start teaching without any experience in teaching or little adequate formal training.

The need for ongoing renewal of professional skills and knowledge is not only a reflection of lack of adequate initial training but also a response to the fact that not everything teachers need to know can be provided during the period of formal training, as well as the fact that the knowledge base of teaching constantly changes.

This paper is about how teachers can develop professionally through teachers' collaboration. Based on the findings of previous research, the aim of this study is to provide a set of practical suggestions for new and experimented EFL teachers to follow in order to develop professionally, gain more self-confidence in their teaching skills, and enhance their teaching abilities.

It is intended to be a contribution towards the creation of a local strategy for continuing professional development at Guelma University, where managers perceived the need to offer continuous support within the work environment which will ensure that teachers have the opportunity to acquire more knowledge and skills.

In this respect, many experienced teachers, including myself, were invited to undertake action research on teacher training and professional development to suggest a framework that emphasizes continuous teacher professional development. The aim is to respond to the national demand for improved quality of teaching and learning which has put issues related to effective professional development high on the agenda of university educators, researchers and policymakers in Algeria.

## **Research Questions**

- The key questions this paper considers include the following:

- ☐ What is professional development?
- ☐ What is teacher collaboration?
- ☐ What are some of the goals and benefits of teacher collaboration?
- ☐ Does teacher collaboration improve professional development?
- ☐ How do teachers collaborate?
- ☐ How can university leaders foster teacher collaboration?

### **Statement of the Problem**

The field of foreign language teaching is subject to rapid changes, both as the profession responds to new educational paradigms and trends and as universities face new challenges as a result of changes in curriculum, and students' needs.

Reality shows that professional training does not exist in most Algerian universities, and even when it does exist it tends to be of limited value and does not help new teachers in tackling the specific pedagogical issues associated with their own students' needs.

Although it has been proved that the power of collaboration in teaching is undeniable, and that teaching collaboratively is more effective when compared to individual teaching, reality indicates that teacher collaboration is not prevalent and approaches to organizing EFL teachers' work are relatively scarce.

In general, teacher collaboration is a departure from existing norms. In most Algerian universities teachers are colleagues in name only.

- ☐ They work out of sight of one another
- ☐ Plan and prepare their lessons and materials alone
- ☐ Struggle on their own to solve their instructional, curricular, and classroom management problems.

### **What does Research Say?**

- ☐ Teacher collaboration produces significant benefits--for students, for the teachers and for the institution.
- ☐ In academic institutions where teachers work collaboratively, students can sense program coherence and a consistency of expectations, which may explain the improved behaviour and achievement that result from collaboration.
- ☐ Teacher collaboration avoids isolation which is one of the greatest impediments to teaching because it limits teachers to only their trials and error experiences.
- ☐ It brings experienced and 'new' teachers closer together to reinforce the competence and confidence of the beginners.

### **Definitions of Professional Development and Collaborative Teaching**

- Professional development has been defined as any activity that increases the skills, knowledge or understanding of teachers, and their effectiveness (DfES, 2001).
- Professional development is usually used in a broad sense, frequently encompassing all types of learning undertaken by teachers beyond the point of their initial training (Craft, 2000, p. 9).
- Teachers may acquire professional knowledge through their own experience of teaching. Alternatively, they may acquire teaching expertise through collaboration with other teachers.
- Collaborative teaching stands for teachers working together to perform well.

- It is defined as two or more teachers sharing a variety of experiences, pedagogies and instruction in an effort to improve their teaching skills and abilities (Mendez-Vilas, 2006), as opposed to teacher autonomy which is defined as self-directed teaching and instruction (Inger, 1993); which has been found to negatively influence student achievement and teacher development (Smylie, Lazarus & brownlee-Conyers, 1996).

### **The Objectives of Collaboration**

- A growing body of recent research shows that collaborative teaching in EFL had great potential and could be a possible solution for reducing some of the educational ailments within the higher education (HE) context.

Research studies commonly outlined three potential goals:

- To create and maintain a positive climate for teachers and students
- To help teachers improve their skills and capacities
- To improve student learning

### **Benefits of Collaborative Teaching**

Collaborative teaching is seen as beneficial for the following reasons:

1. Collaborative teaching enhances faculty members' development as teachers, and provides support when discussing difficult topics encountered in the classroom.
2. Collaborative teaching has a positive impact on faculty members' relationships.
3. Collaborative teaching helps in the development of teachers' skills and abilities. The more teachers develop teaching abilities, the more confident they will become in their teaching.

### **Types of Teacher Collaboration**

Many studies provided a variety of collaborative practices to enable teachers with different levels of expertise to work together through:

- ☐ Self-observation and critical reflection of teaching practices,
- ☐ Conversation with peers on core issues, peer observation, and collaborating with peers on classroom teaching practices (group discussion, sharing feedback, joint planning, and problem solving) (J. G. Wells, 2007; Nehring, et al., 2010; Hord, 1997).

### **Examples of Teacher Collaboration**

#### **1. Reflective Teaching**

- ☐ Reflective teaching, which has recently become a popular term in the context of teachers' professional development, is defined as teaching accompanied by collecting information on one's teaching as the basis of critical reflection; a process that can lead to better understanding of one's teaching practices (Furlong et al., 1994).
- ☐ Critical reflection of one's practices can trigger a deeper understanding of teaching, and contribute to one's professional development (Richards and Lockhart, 1994).
- ☐ Collaborative reflection is defined as an activity of two or more teachers to exchange their professional ideas, learn from each other, and promote each other to professionally develop (Beatty, 2003; Qing, 2009; Hismanoglu, 2010). It allows teachers to reflect and assess themselves when they face problems of teaching. By constantly looking into their own actions and experiences, teachers can professionally grow in their own workplaces.

## **2. Improvement by Collaborating with Peers**

Collaborating with peers or Peer support is another important strategy for teacher professional development. It can be achieved through:

- ☐ Organizing regular formal meetings to allow teachers have conversions with peers on core issues or share ideas on themes related to classroom teaching practices,
- ☐ Taking part in conferences and seminars which are great places to meet other teachers and get new ideas. They may even benefit from international collaboration by becoming members in communities of EFL teachers helping each other around the world.

According to research, this will, in the long run, develop teachers':

- ☐ 1. Basic knowledge and skills of curriculum design, delivery methods, and assessment;
- ☐ 2. Practical skills in managing the teaching process, supporting students' learning and conducting assessment;
- ☐ 3. Deeper understanding of the underlying principles and theories of teaching and learning; and
- ☐ 4. Attitudes, self-awareness and self-development in relation to the teaching and learning process and interaction with students.

## **3. Peer Observation and Collaboration on Classroom Teaching Practices:**

- ☐ A teacher may observe a colleague or ask a colleague to observe him on particular aspects of teaching.
- ☐ Peer observation is an important way to get new ideas and see how others manage their classes.
- ☐ It allows teachers to get feedback on their teaching and eventually discover their strengths and weaknesses.

## **How can Universities Become more Collaborative Workplaces?**

To foster collaboration, university administrators must introduce elements of collaboration into the existing approaches to teachers' work:

- ☐ They must devote necessary resources that better enable teacher work towards more effective collaboration.
- ☐ They must officially create working groups where expert teachers and new ones can meet regularly to share, problem-solve, and learn from one another.
- ☐ They must devote necessary resources that better enable teacher work towards more effective collaboration.
- ☐ They must conduct frequent seminars on the issue of teacher collaboration including problems and benefits, and possible courses of action.
- ☐ They must conduct classes or courses on collaboration for new teachers.
- ☐ They can use mini-grants or travel allowances, or similar rewards to foster these types of teacher collaboration activities.
- ☐ Managers must enable collaboration to become a visible part of the internal culture of the university.

## **Concluding Remarks**

- ☐ Developing a strategy of a professional development for EFL teachers in the direction of improved teaching for the benefit of students is an important objective for the future of higher education.
- ☐ Research has showed that working together in problem-solving activities has proved to be fruitful for the purposes of teaching, learning and research.
- ☐ Accordingly, higher education institutions need to initiate and maintain high professional standards, to provide opportunities for their teachers to pursue professional development, and to provide conditions where teachers cooperate to achieve higher levels of learning among students.
- ☐ Effective collaboration takes time to develop and implement. Teachers consumed with the daily tasks, limited resources, and pressure to demonstrate instructional competency may not find the time to collaborate with others.
- ☐ To save time, higher education institutions may reduce collaborative practices to sharing information by new technology devices.
- ☐ For those sincerely interested in the teaching profession, collaboration can provide important insights into the practice of teaching, present challenges that help us make important changes, and provide our students with better opportunities to learn and grow.
- ☐ I am looking forward to seeing you start working together.