

PROFESSIONAL ADVANCEMENT IN TEACHING FOREIGN LANGUAGES

Jelisaveta SAFRANJ, Ph.D.

**University of Novi Sad, Faculty of Technical Sciences,
Trg Dositeja Obradovica 5, 21000 Novi Sad, Serbia
jsafranj@eunet.rs; savetas@uns.ac.rs**

Aleksandra GOJKOV-RAJIĆ, Ph.D.

**Teacher Training Faculty, University of Belgrade
Kraljice Natalije 43, 11000 Belgrade, Serbia**

Abstract: *The purpose of the following paper is to investigate the attitudes of foreign language teachers in secondary schools in Novi Sad towards professional advancement. The study was conducted by means of a survey, which included three main parts. The total number of 28 language teachers, with varying levels of education, years of experience, and gender took part in the research and according to the findings the most attended activities are workshops, seminars and teaching portfolios; whereas the least attended consist of team teaching, analysis of critical incidents, and case analysis. Furthermore, the findings suggest that the highest rated importance as well as efficiency strategies also contained workshops and seminar. Concerning low rated importance and efficiency strategies, they are self-monitoring, and analyzing critical incidents. Finally, the survey asked the participants for their suggestions for the professional development, which are discussed further in the paper.*

Key words: *foreign language teachers; professional development; workshops; seminars; portfolios.*

Introduction

“In the 21st century society has turned into one where knowledge and information are the core elements in competitiveness for both individuals and nations, as well as serve as the sources for creating value.” (Juszczuk 2006:15). Likewise, one of the preconditions of the free flow of knowledge is successful communication which means mastering foreign languages especially English language as lingua franca of modern society. Therefore, “once knowledge has been created it needs to be properly disseminated and used, if it is to create more value.” (Juszczuk *ibid.*:18). Consequently, the knowledge of foreign languages helps in the immersion into the global educational context as well. Since there has emerged a necessity to be able to communicate in English for different purposes, including business, engineering, tourism as well as education, the professional development of language teachers plays an important role as teachers are seen as *motivators*,

guides and *facilitators* in the language learning process. The current research presents data of the beliefs and attitudes of language teachers towards professional development. The future studies intend to thoroughly explore the experiences of language teachers during a particular activity such as workshops, seminars, etc.

Freeman and Richards (1996) state that ESL/EFL teaching can be considered only with paying attention to the contextual variables, such as language learning strategies, learners' educational and cultural backgrounds, teachers' beliefs and assumptions, etc. However, according to Burton (2009) until recently the central part of much of research in ESL/EFL contexts was students' learning and achievement and argues - how teachers (both pre- and in-service teachers) learn to teach has received little attention of researchers until a decade ago. Johnson (1999: 45) claimed that: "language teacher education was something we have always done, almost intuitively, but not studied". Indeed, there was not much literature on teacher learning and development, especially in Serbian context.

Because of the lack of research on teacher learning, many ESL researchers and scholars are focused on how teachers learn to teach (and why), what teachers know, and why teachers do what they do in real teaching contexts, e.g. (Freeman and Richards 1996; Kojić et. al. 2019; Richards 1998). As a result, teachers are now viewed as "people who construct their own personal and workable theories of teaching" (Basturkmen et al. 2004: 224), rather than "people who master a set of general principles and theories developed by experts" (Basturkmen et al. *ibid.*). Consequently, teaching is now conceptualized as a complex activity, which includes teachers' action, thought and the interaction of the two in socio-cultural contexts, e.g. (Basturkmen et al. 2004; Borg 2003; Johnson 1999). Juszczuk (2003: 175) points out that "teacher should focus on crucial points of discussion, ask questions, estimate students responses, synthesize and summarize points, and help take advantage of the readings and class resources" seems to be highly relevant in foreign language teaching activity as well.

Second language teacher education is a term that was originally used by Richards (1990) to account for the preparation of language teachers. As he declares "the intent of second language teacher education must be to provide opportunities for the novice to acquire the skills and competencies of efficient teachers and to discover the working rules that efficient teachers use." (Richards *ibid.*: 15). It can be noticed that main participants of a language teacher program are inexperienced teachers, who are new to the profession and need guidance and support in building blocks of efficient teaching. "Pre-service training", "initial teacher training" and "initial teacher education" are other names for this concept.

It is undeniable that teachers need regular opportunities to update their professional knowledge and skills, i.e. the opportunities for professional development. According to Richards (2005) teachers need to take part in activities such as

- engaging in self-reflection and evaluation
- developing specialized knowledge and skills about many aspects of teaching
- expanding their knowledge base about research, theory and issues in teaching

- taking on new roles and responsibilities, such as supervisor or mentor teacher, teacher-researcher, or materials writer
- developing collaborative relationships with other teachers

While most of the activities listed above address the development of more experienced teachers, "developing specialized knowledge and skills about many aspects of teaching" can be said to target the novice teachers. Teacher education programs, thus, should provide participants with the required knowledge and skills to be applied in real classrooms and the ability to "engage in self-reflection and evaluation", which according to Burton (2009) assists teachers' lifelong professional development, forming a critical attitude to one's own teaching and enabling to make better teaching decisions.

Research methodology

The study employed a survey which consisted of three parts. In Part 1 the participants were asked to mark activities according to whether they have taken part in it or not. Part 2 requested language teachers to rate the importance as well as efficiency of the stated activities on a 5 point Likert scale, with 1 being unimportant/least efficient, and 5 - very important/most efficient. Part 3 included suggestions of language teachers in secondary schools for professional development.

The participants were 28 foreign language teachers in secondary schools in Novi Sad with varying levels of education, years of experiences, and gender.

Research findings

Part 1

The following tables list the distribution of the participants according to years of experience, level of education, gender.

Table 1. Participants according to the years of experience

Years of experience	number of participants
0-5	9
6-10	8
11-15	5
16-20	3
20 and more	3

Table 2. Participants according to the level of education

Level of Education	number of participants
BA	25
MA candidates	2
MA	1

Table 3. Participants according to gender

Gender	number of participants
Male	4
Female	24

A further analysis of the survey data reveals that the most attended activities for professional development appears to be *workshops* and *seminars*. *Teaching portfolios* is cited third by the language teachers. Regarding the least attended activities, they include *case analysis*, *analyzing critical incidents*, and *team teaching*. Moreover, the activities were also ranked according to their importance for the professional development of language teachers. Based on the results, the top ranked methods entail *workshops*, *seminars*, *action research*, *teaching portfolio*, and *case analysis*. On the other hand, the lowest rated activities are comprised of *peer observation*, *self-monitoring*, *analyzing critical incidents*, and *team teaching*. The statistical data is presented below in Tables 4-7.

Table 4. Most attended activities

Activity	number of appearances	%
Workshops	25	89.28%
Seminars	23	82.14%
Teaching portfolios	20	71.43%

Table 5: Least attended activities

Activity	number of appearances	%
Case analysis	3	10.71%
Analyzing critical incidents	3	10.71%
Team teaching	2	7.14%

Table 6. Highest rated activities

Activity	Importance rating
Workshops	4.86
Seminars	4.82
Action research	4.21
Teaching portfolio	3.32
Case analysis	3.28
Keeping a teaching journal	3.28

Table 7. Lowest rated activities

Activity	Importance rating
Peer observation	2.75
Self monitoring	2.50
Analyzing critical incidents	2.46
Team teaching	2.39

Part 2

Below is the list of three most efficient and three least efficient activities that foreign language teachers pointed out in the survey.

Table 8. Most efficient activities

Activity	Efficiency rating
Workshops	4.78
Teaching portfolios	4.75
Seminars	4.11

Table 9. Least efficient activities

Activity	Efficiency rating
Team teaching	3.36
Keeping a teaching journal	2.89
Case analysis	2.57
Analyzing critical incidents	2.36
Self-monitoring	2.32

Discussion

One of the noticeable elements in the results is that two most attended activities, *workshops* and *seminars*, also appear at the top of the most important as well as efficient activity list. An inference that can be drawn from such a coincidence is that these activities were most familiar to language teachers, which in turn resulted in the highest grade. Therefore, a further investigation into these strategies is needed to obtain more precise data. Regarding the statements to support their answers, language teachers believe that both *workshops* and *seminars* are "*best techniques to share experience and to see somebody's discoveries in teaching*". In addition, the duration of these activities is also thought to be an advantage, as it allows participants "*to learn as much as possible in a relatively short period*". Another benefit of workshops and seminars is that they "*promote creativity and innovation*". Thus, it is possible to conclude that these two strategies for professional development are ultimate by nature, as they provide not only grounds for growth and progress of novice teachers by means of short-term input of experiences of colleagues, but also practical implications to be used in a classroom. Nevertheless, several teachers think that the approach to seminars in Serbia sometimes lacks innovations, as we "*share anything but obvious things*". Additionally, it is stated that usually during seminars "*there is not enough time to*

discuss each case and the ways of how to apply them in real classrooms". Finally, one teacher makes a rather radical statement by saying: "*usually the information one gets during a workshop is never applied in practice*". Such comments by teachers should interest teacher educators and organizers in terms of the efficient implementation of these strategies for the purpose of professional development of foreign language teachers.

Regarding the *teaching portfolio*, an interesting fact about this activity is that it was one of the most attended activities with 20 appearances (71.43%) according to the survey results but it was one of low rated strategies with a mean of 3.32 which stands for *moderately important*. Most of the teachers consider *teaching portfolios* as the most efficient activity (efficiency rating 4.75) as well as a means of collecting useful resources. However, none of the responses mention any kind of reflection or review, which is stressed by Richards (2005). In addition, the aspect of peer coaching or collaboration with other teachers has also been omitted. This leads to an assumption that language teachers in secondary schools in Novi Sad are not familiar with the latter two characteristics of a *teaching portfolio* and use it only to gather practical materials which can be reused later. Finally, one of the participants mentions the certification that teachers go through, and says that teaching portfolios have this aim only, i.e. contribution to somebody's progress in career.

Concerning the least attended activities, namely *team teaching*, its importance was also rated the lowest with a mean of 2.39. Most of the teachers believe that this strategy for professional development is average efficient (3.36) in a way that having two teachers in a class "*is not productive when they have different views*". However, teachers are missing an important aspect of *team teaching*, which involves two teachers sharing the responsibility for teaching a class. As Richards (2005) states, this method is comprised of "team planning, team teaching and team follow up", which does not necessarily suppose two teachers teaching simultaneously. Therefore, it is possible to infer that the fact that *team teaching* was among the least attended activity affected the answers of teachers so that they started to deem it as a method of two teachers teaching at the same time. On the contrary, one participant mentioned an acronym for TEAM, which stands for *Together Everyone Achieves More* and added: "*when teachers share responsibilities, it generates a lot of ideas*". It can be said that this teacher assumes what Richards (ibid.: 161) states for the benefits of *team teaching*, which include "collegiality, different roles, combined expertise, teacher-development opportunities and learner benefits".

Another less attended activity, *peer observation*, is presented as a dichotomy: two participants cited it in the most efficient strategies list by saying that through peer observation a teacher gets useful ideas and advice and thus may develop professionally. However, other two teachers believe that "*peer observation may lead to stress*" or lack of self-confidence. Bearing in mind some previous research (Bandur-Mandić, et. al., 2019), it is possible to assume that teachers in this study consider the issue of control somehow related to *peer observation*.

Moreover, another probability is that teachers are not familiar with approaches to peer observation that comprises such characteristics as nonjudgmental listening and possible implication of certain action of the teacher as well as offering and assisting teachers in finding other ways of doing things. It is claimed that a more considerable result could be obtained by means of collaboration with other teachers. In addition, the need to think scientifically is also present in this strategy as one reviews, reflects and changes his/her teaching.

Lastly, *analyzing critical incidents* received more negative comments than positive. Language teachers suppose that critical incidents happen rarely and offer to combine this activity with *journal writing*, to be able to review and analyze events that take place in the classroom. On the other hand, two of the teachers mentioned the beneficial aspect of this strategy. They stated that "*it allows finding a reason and solution of the occurring incident and avoids them in the future*". This brings to an inference, that teachers are aware of the advantages of *analyzing critical incidents* for the professional development.

A further classification was done according to the rating that teachers gave to each activity. A definition of terms was provided so that they could read and presumably rate the importance of the activity for the professional development of language teachers. *Workshops* and *seminars* have been already discussed in the paper; concerning *action research*, it can be said that teachers are quite informed about this strategy as they believe that teacher may become more knowledgeable about the situation in the classroom and may learn whether the students are making any progress. Furthermore, a practical element is also included in teachers' comments as they state that *action research* allows for the implementation of ideas in the classroom. Obviously, by ideas teachers mean interventions that teachers may have to take in order to see whether some techniques and methods are useful for the learners or not. *Keeping a teaching journal* was given a moderately importance rating of 3.28. However, it was also assessed as average efficient activity of 2.89. On one hand, teachers argue that *a teaching journal* helps to review and analyze teaching activity, whereas others think that due to be efficient a teacher should have sufficient methodology knowledge. Otherwise, the reasoning in a journal will lack logic and consistence and will mostly be based on subjective judgments.

One of the noticeable features of teachers' comments is that they rarely mention, *self-monitoring*, which represents an individual-type of professional development. However, those who do, state the importance of feedback for the progress. As for *self-monitoring* one teacher made a personal reflection about the times he began teaching by saying that great deal of his teaching skills and knowledge are due to his personal efforts to develop better communication strategies and get along with his students. Moreover, he stated that his own critical judgment and recognition of shortcomings "*taught him how to teach efficiently and monitor students*". Thus, we can observe several functions of self monitoring mentioned here, which is providing awareness about personal teaching style as

well as approach to difficulties and also acquiring basic skills of classroom management.

A risk for false analysis is mentioned for another strategy, *case analysis*, which is also present in writing journal entries. Furthermore, another teacher claims that the documentation and assessment of each case will require a significant amount of time, which is quite hard to allocate in today's teachers' lives.

Regarding Part 3 of the survey, where teachers were asked to cite their suggestions for professional development, teachers refer to the significance of the concentration on teaching activity. Some of the teachers believe that documentation and paper work, which take a lot of time, are useless and that they increase the load that teachers already have. Others propose obligatory *peer observation* and attendance of *workshops/seminars*. A novice teacher mentioned the importance of having "up-to-date" knowledge about techniques and methods as well as the need to learn from more experienced teachers. Another teacher recommends organizing mini-seminars dedicated to "how-to" skills. Particularly, she offers educative seminars on "*how to keep teaching portfolios, etc.*" Finally, three experienced teacher state that teachers should participate in any of the available activities as often as possible.

Conclusion

The current study attempted to identify the attitudes of secondary school foreign language teachers in Novi Sad towards professional development. Judging by the findings of the research, it is possible to assume that most of the teachers are aware of most of the activities. However, they fail to reason or forget to mention several functions of the activities, which lead to an assumption that there is a need to introduce these strategies during workshops/seminars; a point which was also mentioned by one of the participants. Concerning the statistics, an interesting pattern emerges for teaching portfolios. It was among well attended activities (71.43%) and high efficiency rating (4.75) but was rated moderately important (3.32) at the same time. Furthermore, *team teaching*, the least attended activity (7.14%) was rated the lowest for its importance (2.39), but most of the teachers believe that this strategy is average efficient (3.36) in teaching activity. Thus, we can assume that special training is needed for language teachers to acquire the basic skills of professional development which is not short term, but a life-long activity. Teachers' suggestions in Part 3 contain references to specific strategies for professional development, and one teacher has a harmonious point of view with the researcher by saying that there is a need to organize "how-to" seminars and show language teachers the ways to develop professionally.

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