

# A case study of professional development programs: Perspective and practices of Bhutanese ESL teachers and pre- service teachers

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## **Abstract**

Quite recently, the Ministry of Education, in Bhutan has introduced several steps to enhance teachers' knowledge and competency through intensive and extensive professional development programs. Such programs are aimed at curbing the deteriorating quality of education in the nation. Although teachers are trained through various programmes, no empirical study has been done so far to provide information on how teachers perceive these programs. Therefore, this paper highlights Bhutanese teachers' practices of professional development programs and how they perceive these practices. The findings of the study were collected through a semi-structured interview with three in-service ESL teachers and two pre-service ESL teachers. The study revealed that the teachers in Bhutan experience professional development programs at various levels- national, district and school. All these programs benefitted teachers since the content of the programs aligned with teachers' classroom practices. These programs benefitted teachers in teaching effectively to better their students' learning outcomes. However, effective implementation of the Professional Development (PD) programs is determined by teachers' willingness to implement and process the change. Also, to have an effective implementation of programs there is a need of a policy that mandates teachers' active participation and implementation of the program, and leaders' support and guidance.

**Keywords:** *Professional Development, Professional Learning Communities, ESL, ESL Teachers, Teaching and Teacher Education, Teachers' Perception, Pre-service ESL teachers*

## Introduction

Quality education in schools is paramount for the future success of any nation and teachers play the pivotal role to ensure that children in schools receive an education that is relevant and realistic in the 21<sup>st</sup> century and beyond. In order to improve the quality of the education, Ministry of Education (MoE), (2014) had developed Bhutan Education Blueprint 2014-2024. The blueprint was intended to examine current challenges and required reforms for the betterment of Bhutan's education system to ensure that Bhutanese students not only receive best of nation's wisdom but also global competence.

According to Bhutan Education Blueprint 2014-2024 (2014), one of the issues was about the competency and classroom practices of teachers in Bhutan. The written essays of teachers as sample for the blueprint survey raised a concern on English language competency of the teachers after looking at their language structures. In addition, classroom practices of the teachers were observed to be mostly didactic and teacher centered in nature. In order to overcome these issues in the school, the blueprint recommended a mandate which required all the teachers in Bhutan to avail themselves of this 80 hour of professional development (PD) program in a year.

Aligning to the recommendation of the blueprint, at an Annual Education Conference (PPD, 2018), the MoE has resolved that all the teachers will have to avail themselves of the 80 hours of PD programs in a year with an expectation to improve teacher quality which would achieve the goal of ensuring a quality education. Nevertheless, MoE had envisioned the challenges for the teachers to do so at an individual level, therefore the conference further had a resolution that stated 40 hours of PD to be provided by MoE at national level for teachers and the remaining 40 hours to be provided at the district and school level.

Accordingly, the MoE provided 40 hours of PD to teachers nationwide starting from 2016. So far almost all the teachers are expected to have attended two Nation Based In-service Programs (NBIP) in the years 2016 and 2017. In 2016,

teachers across the nation were trained on “Transformative Pedagogy” which focused on Kagan’s Cooperative Learning Structures to transform teachers’ teaching practices inside the classroom. Later, in 2017, teachers were given a workshop on “English for Effective Communication” to improve their communication skills and language competency. These NBIPs were of 40 hours duration each.

In addition to these NBIPs, teachers in the schools were aware of achieving additional 40 hours of PD programs through District Based In-service Program (DBIP) and School Based In-Service Programs (SBIP). Teachers who had availed themselves of PD programs at national and district level further disseminated the information in the form of SBIPs at the school level. Hence, it was noticeable that various forms of PDs were administered across the nation at various level: national, district and school.

Since 2016, teachers have been availing themselves of PD programs at various levels to fulfil the mandate of the Annual Education Conference that states the requirement of 80 hours of PD to be availed by each teacher in a year. However, little is known about the PD practices in the schools of Bhutan and how teachers perceive these PD practices. Surveying and collecting information from all the school teachers in regard to this subject is beyond the scope of this study. Therefore, current study is limited to one school practice and specifically the practices and perceptions of the English teachers of that school.

This paper focuses on teachers’ perception on the PD programs from two perspectives. The first involves English as a Second Language (ESL) teachers’ perception of the two NBIPs of 40 hours each that they had attended in 2016 and 2017. The second underpins the perception of ESL teachers and pre-service teachers on the current practices of carrying out PDs in their schools and the impact of the program on their instructional practices and the students’ learning outcomes. Thus, the study intends to answer the following research questions:

## Research Questions

1. How do Bhutanese ESL pre-service and in-service teachers perceive professional development program practices?
2. What challenges do teachers face while implementing professional development programs?
3. Is there a change on teachers' self-efficacy beliefs after implementing the professional development programs?
4. What factors need to be considered in implementing effective professional development programs?

This study aims at providing Ministry of Education, Bhutan, with data on the effectiveness of professional development practices in the schools. At a broader level the study would enable the ESL teachers to learn about teacher education that would improve the quality of their language, their practices to improve staff collegiality and the learner outcomes.

## Literature review

Most teachers see professional development programs as the source of their growth to become a better teacher. Most teachers define their competency and efficiency in terms of their students' outcome. Teachers believe that the PD programs not only impart knowledge and skills to enhance the students' outcomes but also gain concrete and practical ideas to operate their classroom teaching and learning. It enhances both competency and satisfaction. (Guskey, 2002)

Also, professional development of the teachers is essential "to alter the professional practices, beliefs, and understanding of school persona toward an articulated end." (Guskey, 1986, p. 5). The end here refers to the improvement of learning outcomes of the students. Teachers' efficiency is determined by the outcomes related to both behaviors and activities of their students.

Most PD programs attempt to change teachers' beliefs, attitudes and perceptions as these changes are presumed to help teachers alter their classroom

practices to improve their students' learning. The PD programs should have practical ideas that enhance the learning outcomes in the students as targeted by the teachers. Nevertheless, Guskey(1986) hypothesises that the ineffectiveness of PD is the result of PD programs not being able to motivate teachers' participation in such activities or they provided lesser or no practical applicability to teachers' classroom practices.

Guskey (1986, 2002) proposes an alternative model for implementing effective professional development programs. An alternative model namely the 'Model of Teacher Change' focuses on three major outcomes of professional development: change in teacher's classroom practices, change in student's learning outcomes, and change in teacher's beliefs and attitudes.

Firstly, any change from new PD programs is hard to exist without anxiety, time and effort. Therefore, teachers need to know that change is a slow and challenging process. Teachers cannot expect a positive result of the new program overnight in a short span of time without hardwork and some hurdles.

Secondly, teachers need to develop a procedure to collect feedbacks and evidences regarding students' learning on a regular basis to sustain the PD programs which have been implemented. There will be a noticeable change in teacher's beliefs and attitudes if they gain positive evidences in students' learning from the program they have implemented.

Finally, it is crucial to pressure teachers to implement the new program even though their past program was successful since change in their beliefs and attitudes is expected after its implementation. Therefore, Guskey(2002) states that continued follow up, support and pressure provide '...the encouragement, motivation, and occasional nudging that many practioners require to persist in the challenging tasks that are intrinsic to all change efforts.'"(pg. 388)

Some aspects for effective professional development as recommended by Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin (2011) are related to the content of the

programs, school culture and practices, and policies. The content of the PD program includes what teachers know, what they want to learn, and apply and practice what they have learned to their classroom practices. School needs to have a culture that promotes collaboration and collegial learning and problem solving amongst the teachers with sustained, continuous and intensive practices.

Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin (2011) also state significance of having following three features of policy for effective PD programs. There should be a policy that firstly creates opportunities for teachers to practice through developing curriculum and assessment, setting standards, and evaluating practice. Secondly, fundings should be provided for professional infrastructure that support teacher participation and learning in collaboration and collegial manner within the school and with other schools and organizations too. Thirdly, policy must focus on enhancing PD programs that would nurture outstanding learning community of teachers rather than institutionalizing ideas that could be irrelevant and obsolete in the real field of teaching and learning.

Prior study of Borko (2004) indicate that developed country like USA too put teacher professional development as top priority to enhance the quality of students' learning and promote teachers' content knowledge and teaching practices. Study examining effectiveness of PD programs found that teachers need to be involved in the planning process of the PD programs since teachers shall have in mind their outcomes. All these PD programs need to be coherent and this can be done by knowing what teachers already know and what they need to know (Lee, 2005).

Another component that enhances effective PD is teacher collaboration. Penuel, Fishman, Yamaguchi & Gallagher (2007) state that professional development activities can be more effective when teachers collectively embrace the idea. In their study, teachers reported collective participation in PD lead to positive teacher change. Teacher collaboration for PD programs helps develop trust, support relationship and collegial interaction amongst the teachers. This

collegiaty enhances effective implementation of the program to better students' outcomes.

In regard to exploring perception on the continuing professional development program Grieve & Mcginley (2010) investigated Scottish teachers. The program engaged teachers in collaborative learning and sharing on their practices linking with scholarly theories. Participating in this PD program had enhanced teachers' practices through constant reflection and self-evaluation. Teachers became more creative and innovative in imparting knowledges to students of varied abilities including special needs. The program undertaken by the teachers had positive impact on them since it boosted their self-confidence and esteem to teach better by reflecting critically on their practices by aligning to the scholarly theories. Therefore, their study showed that PD programs that were aligned to their knowledge of teaching practices was perceived positively by the teachers.

Avalos (2011) reviewed research manuscripts of ten years starting from 2000 to 2010 on teacher's professional learning and its impact on teacher and student change. This review revealed that PDs involving teachers' reflective experiences and collaboration resulted into positive teacher change and school culture. This is further supported by Ortactepe & Akyel's (2015) study that explored effects of a professional development program on Turkish English as a foreign language teachers' self-efficacies and classroom practices. The study found that teachers' classroom practices improved and were more student centered with various enthusiastic activities after teachers had attended the PD programs. These teachers were noticed to have developed constructively through the PD process.

Another study (BABA, 2017) investigated the nature of professional development programs in Libya, and how effective they were through a qualitative study of four English teachers. The study asserted that PD programs targeted towards achieving quality teaching and learning were favored by the teachers. Teachers enthusiastically got involved into various kinds of PD programs to

enhance their teaching process since the PD programs helped them to not only teach but also collaborate with other teachers. Finally, school leaders could be the main stakeholders in fostering teachers to implement the programs successfully after discovering the relevant programs for the teachers to improve their teaching practices and student performances.

In a nut shell, common aspects of implementing effective PD programs as recommended by above scholars and researchers are that, while designing the program, one need to know teachers' prior experiences and knowledge and what they need to know. The content of the program need to be coherent and aligning towards teachers' teaching and learning practices. Another significant aspect to have a successful PD programs is through teachers' collaboration amongst themselves and with other teachers and organizations. Such kind of collaboration can be fostered by the school leaders.

### **Participants' background and data collection methodology**

The study explored the beliefs of ESL teachers on PD programs. Data were obtained from a semi-structured interviews with three regular and two pre-service ESL teachers. The regular teachers have been teaching English to students of Lower Secondary School students for 15 to 26 years. The other two preservice teachers were on their teaching practicum of six months in the school. They taught English to students of grade four and six for six months. They were third year preservice teachers of Paro College of Education, Bhutan.

Unlike the pre-service teachers, the three regular teachers have attended two NBIPs in 2016 and 2017. In addition to these NBIPs they have attended numerous SBIPs and sat in their subject groups everyweek for their PD programs called Time-Tabled-Time (Triple -T). The pre-service teachers have attended two SBIPs and all the Triple-T programs during their six months' practicum at the school.



Teachers met in their subject group for an hour every week to discuss on the PD topics. In the beginning of the term, teachers planned their Triple -T topics according to their needs to improve their daily teaching practices. Since the program is scheduled on a particular day at a specific time on a planned topic, it is called Time-Tabled-Time by the teachers of the school. Nevertheless, some topics popped up adhoc according to teacher's need in the midst of their daily teaching process. For this English subject department, teachers met every Thursday for an hour and some of the topics discussed were on continuous assessment, writing processes, cooperative learning structures, competency based test development and Bloom's taxonomy.

## **Findings**

In tune with the research questions, the findings generated from the semi structured focused group interview with three in-service and two pre-service teachers are categorized into four broad categories: (a) In-service and Pre-service Teachers' Perception on their PD Practices and Most Effective PD Program, (b) Change on Teachers' Self-Efficacy Beliefs and Teaching and Learning Outcomes, (c) Factors Affecting Effective Implementation of PD Programs, and (d) Aspects Needed to Consider for Effective Professional Development Programs

While reporting the findings, the researchers have used pseudonyms Teacher 1, Teacher 2 and Teacher 3 for the three in-service teachers, and PT 1 and PT 2 for pre-service teacher participants to hide their identities.

### **a. In-service and Pre-service Teachers' Perceptions on Their PD Practices and Most Effective PD Program**

Under this category the participants have revealed how the PD programs have enhanced their instructional practices, and which kind of instructional practice was the most effective. Some of these are listed below:

- ***Professional development practices and their impacts on teachers' instructional practices***

Bhutanese teachers have availed themselves of various kinds of PD programs starting from school to national level. All the three in-service teachers have the experience of attending all forms of PDs such as NBIPs, SBIPs and Triple-T. They have mentioned the positive impacts of these programs on their teaching practices inside the classroom.

Teacher 1 stated, *"I have attended numerous workshops and PD programs at the national level, school level and I also have been attending Triple-T programs in schools. I see a lot of improvement in my own teaching practices."* Similarly, Teacher 2 asserted, *"For me NBIPs, SBIPs, and Triple –T have tremendously helped me to mold myself as a better and effective teacher for my students."* Teacher 3 supported, *"I have learned numerous strategies and skills and it have helped me in teaching and learning processes inside the classrooms."*

- ***Professional development to update teachers' instructional practices.***

Professional development programs not only improved teachers' instructional practices but also helped them in updating their practices in line with curriculum paradigm shift. Teacher 1 asserted, *"Children then and now are different. So, we cannot go on resorting to the same old tools, strategies. With time we have to try and improve with the things we do inside the classroom through the PD programs."*

- ***Impact of professional development programs on pre-service teachers***

The pre-service teachers had no experience of attending PD programs at national level other than the course they had undertaken at the teacher education college. They had the experience of attending SBIPs and Triple-T programs at the school while undergoing their teaching practicum. These teachers found the programs beneficial for their teaching practices as beginning teachers.

PT 2 said, *“After attending SBIPs and Triple-T in the school, I am able to improve myself in terms of classroom management, assessment tools and carrying out activities in the class.”* PT 2 added, *“These PD programs helped me to teach better in the class.”*

PD programs have helped pre-service teachers to teach effectively and boost their teaching confidence. PT 2 said, *“When we first came here, we did not know how to go about our teaching. PD programs have helped me a lot.”* PT 1 further stated,

*“I feel blest that I am here especially when I talk with friends in other schools. They do not learn and receive support from regular teachers and school administration like we do here. We are mentored and trained well to teach effectively through such programs.”*

- **Most effective PD program**

Amongst the three PD programs- NBIP, SBIP, and Triple-T, both in-service and pre-service teachers found Triple-T the most effective program since the topics discussed in the program mostly aligned to their teaching practices inside the classroom.

PT 1 stated, *“Triple-T is more beneficial since it helps us to focus on all the aspects of effective teaching skills and discuss on teaching process to improve my teaching.”* Teacher 1 agreed,

*“I agree with PT 1. Triple-T is effective compared to NBIP and SBIP.”* Further, PT 2 asserted, *“Triple-T is effective since it enabled me to implement the topic discussed. We discussed about assessment and I implemented it in my classroom. I have noticed that my students were able to focus and carry out their task well.”*

Teacher 1 reported,

*“I feel Triple-T gives room for English teachers to focus on developing four skills. At times we tend to divert our focus on teaching the literary text rather than focusing on the language skills. Triple-T programs remind us to not only focus on developing students’ language skills but teach students systematically and in an organized manner.”*

She further added,

*“Triple-T helps teachers to share their practices and allows other teachers to learn and implement some effective activities in their class too. They learn from each other through discussions. These discussions are all fruitful since it is all about classroom practices.”*

Although NBIPs were found beneficial for the teachers, Triple-T was found more effective comparatively. Teacher 2 stated, *“NBIP on 21<sup>st</sup> century transformative pedagogy has helped me teach language effectively.”* Teacher 3 too reported, *“NBIP on 21<sup>st</sup> century transformative pedagogy was beneficial but Triple-T was more beneficial.”*

## **b. Change on Teachers’ Self-Efficacy Beliefs and Teaching and Learning Outcomes**

In this section of the findings, the researcher have presented relationship between effective implementation of PD programs and teachers’ self-efficacy beliefs, and result of effective PD programs to better teachers’ instructional practices and students’ learning outcomes.

- ***Professional development and teacher’s self-efficacy beliefs***

Teachers believed that PD programs could be effective and bring change in teachers if they have willingness to implement the programs. Teacher 1 reported, *“Effectiveness of PD programs would depend on an individual teacher. If the*

*teacher tries to implement whatever is being learnt from the programs and follow-up them into their teaching process, I think the program can be effective.”* Teacher 2 and 3 agreed with Teacher 1 and stated, *“We also agree to Teacher 1 that effectiveness of PD programs would depend upon the attitude of the teachers.”* To sum up, teacher 1 stated, *“If the teacher is enthusiastic about learning, it makes all the difference.”*

- **Professional development for self-improvement as a teacher**

Professional development was found effective for teachers to be knowledgeable and reflective teachers. Teacher 1 said, *“I have become much experienced teacher through PD experiences. It has given me knowledge to improve my learning and reflect on my teaching experiences.”*

In addition, PD programs were helpful for beginning teachers to teach effectively. Teacher 2 asserted, *“At the beginning of my teaching career, I had a tough time teaching students and difficult time finding support from my colleagues since we hardly met in such PD programs. These programs are needed to help teachers teach effectively.”*

- **Professional development improves students learning outcomes**

Teachers were able to notice positive changes and improved results in the students after they had implemented the PD programs in their classrooms. Teacher 1 said,

*“I taught my students since their Pre-primary and by the time they were in grade IV, I saw progress in terms of their academic achievement. Use of CL structures provided opportunities for my students to share and learn from each other.”*

Teacher 2 supplemented,

*“I saw my students speaking out and volunteering to share their opinions which I think is the result of implementing the CL structures I have learned. I have implemented them after attending*

*the PD program and it helped in improving my students' performances."*

PD program on Cooperative Learning (CL) structures had helped pre-service teachers in creating an effective lesson despite having attended the program for two hours as a Triple-T program. PT1 shared, *"CL structures helped me in creating a fun-learning environment, in a way it helps in creating a comfort zone between the teacher and students. They get rid of hesitation and participate actively in the teaching and learning processes."* PT 2 added, *"And the program helped me in making my lesson very interactive since children felt free to interact with their teacher and friends."*

Further, PT 1 reported, *"I learned about writing process in Triple-T and implemented that in my class. I compared the work of my students' present work from the beginning and found there was an improvement and quality was better."*

### **c. Factors Affecting Effective Implementation of PD programs**

Despite effective implementations of PD programs, teachers face challenges in regard to time, resources, and receiving cooperation from the students while carrying out the program. Another factor that affects the successful implementation of the programs is the teachers' resistance to change.

- ***Time and resource constraint, and students' cooperation***

Teachers face various kind of challenges such as time and resource constraints in implementing the PD programs. Teacher 2 said,

*"Not all programs could be implemented easily. For example, following all the steps of writing process was time consuming. Another issue is the lack of resources. Most students do not bring in the resources and teacher needs to provide them with it."*

Similarly, the pre-service teacher faced challenges in gaining cooperation from the students. PT 1 said, *“I have learned about creating conducive learning environment using ‘Cheers’ but students were hesitant to use them.”*

- **Teachers’ resistance to change**

Conversely, most challenging task in implementing PD programs was teachers’ willingness and fear of change. Thus, they took time to accept the change and implement it in their classrooms. Teacher 1 reported,

*“Whenever we want to implement new things, it is always uncomfortable. So people don’t want to come out of their comfort zones. If we have to grow and change, we have to come out of the comfort zone. People do not want to accept change. They want to keep doing what they have been doing. So change is always hard because people face difficulties in implementing the new things in the class. We were not comfortable implementing the structures we have learned at ‘21<sup>st</sup> century transformative pedagogy training’ at the beginning. But accepting it as an effective teaching tools and practicing it persistently made it easier to use. Now the structures have become part of me and I don’t feel that I am doing something different.”*

#### **d. Aspects Needed to Consider for Effective Professional Development Programs**

In order to have successful implementation PD programs in schools, there should be a strong policy that requires active participation of all the teachers and the school leader’s support.

- **Policy that mandates teacher’s active participation**

Teacher 1 stated, *“Each teacher should come up with a topic for discussion so that it helps that particular teacher to reflect on their teaching processes and find a*

*solution to challenges they face inside their classroom.” PT 2 agreed and supplemented, “Also a mandate should be made for every individual teacher to share their expertise.”*

PT 1 added, *“At times teachers fail to implement the programs. Therefore, the coordinators must make mandatory for all the teachers to implement what was being learned and share about their experiences after the implementation.”*

- **School leader’s support**

Support from the school leader was considered vital to implement PD programs effectively. Teacher 1 stated, *“There should be support from the leaders. They are the main support. Our principal immensely support his teachers in developing themselves which helps in implementing the programs effectively in the school.”*

PT 2 supplemented, *“Teachers cannot develop themselves where they do not have their leaders’ support. And then students do not learn ultimately.”*

## **Discussion and Conclusion**

Corroborating prior studies (Lee, 2005; Grieve & Mcginley, 2010; Ortactepe & Akyel, 2015; BABA, 2017; and Sener & Cokcsiskan, 2017), the ESL teachers - both in-service and pre-service have positive perception of the PD programs since the programs improved their instructional practices which ultimately improved their students’ learning outcomes. The PD programs enhanced experiences of senior teachers, beginning teachers and pre-service teachers to improve their instructional practices. The programs benefitted them in acquiring knowledge and keeping themselves updated with trending teaching practices.

Through the interview with the teachers, it could be concluded that PD program that met ESL teachers’ immediate need such as Triple-T were effective and beneficial for them as they mostly aligned with teacher practices. Poskitt (2005) posits that different teachers have different needs of PD programs therefore it is recommendable to have PDs that suit content and pedagogical needs of the teachers and schools. Moreover, such programs benefitted novice teachers to



receive support in their subject areas from their senior teachers teaching similar subjects. Avalos (2011) asserts that beginning teachers are at complex stage of learning as a teacher and they need mentoring from experienced teachers.

Conversely, Triple-T could have been effective as the program provide teachers to work collaboratively to better their students' learning outcomes. Penuel et al. (2007) assert such teacher collaboration for PD programs are helpful in developing trust, support relationship and collegial interaction amongst the teachers. In line with Darling-Hammond and McLaughlin (2011), the program provided opportunity for teachers to support each other on their subject matters, pedagogical issues, or school reforms and finally it enabled them to practically apply theoretical knowledge gained into their classroom practices.

However, the effective implementation of the PD programs requires longer time span for teachers to process the programs. This study attests Lee (2005) and Bayar's (2014) recommendation that school needs to give teachers ample time to implement the program learnt into their classroom practices and follow up on the program through feedback and evaluation since most teachers do not get enough time to implement the program.

Most challenging factor in implementing the PD program is the teachers' resistance to change. Guskey (1986, 2002) states that any change is difficult to be implemented. Thus, the policy developers should develop policy that mandate teachers to implement the programs. Unless they implement the programs and experience positive outcomes, it would be hard to change teachers' self-efficacy beliefs. While implementing, teacher should be mindful that the programs need to be implemented as a continuous process for longer span of time as recommended by Bayar (2014).

Also, school leaders' support is vital in having an effective implementation of PD programs. As stated by Moore, Kochan, Kraska, & Reames (2011) school leaders determine the effectiveness of PD programs. Hence, they need to be more

aware of the significance of high quality PD and its planning and implementation with adequate skills, knowledge, and resources.

The study concludes that the PD programs benefit both pre-service and in-service teachers despite their number of years in the teaching field. Effective PD programs provide opportunity to novice teachers to interact and work with experienced senior teachers while these senior teachers renew their experiences as they play the roles of experts, mentors and teacher leaders (Darling-Hammond and McLaughlin, 2011). The PD programs allow teachers to exchange the ideas they know and what they want to learn, and apply what they have learned to the classroom practices. Thus, there could be a policy requisite that provides incentive, grants, and resources for teachers to anticipate their needs for strong teacher community and collegial learning network amongst themselves.

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