

When College Is Over: Continuing the Professional Development of Language Teachers **By Jersus José Colmenares López, USA/Venezuela**

Pursuing Professional Development

Most teachers who have just graduated are probably experiencing the excitement and feeling of achievement from their graduation. However, they should also be aware from their first steps as professionals that learning to be a teacher is “a life-long experience” (Crandall, 2001, p 535). The process of becoming an experienced teacher who is aware of her/his own philosophy of teaching and learning, who can efficiently draw on and adapt content knowledge, and who is capable of making decisions before, during and after every teaching and learning experience does not take place right after college is over. Professional development entails a constant search for answers to questions which arise from the ever new circumstances in educational contexts as the years pass. The reason that questions emerge in this profession term after term, year after year is because, as Richards and Farrell (2005) explain, teachers have changing needs at different times.

Professional development is a process of general growth that is not focused on a specific position but rather “serves a long-term goal and seeks to facilitate growth of teachers’ understanding of teaching and of themselves as teachers” (Richards & Farrell, 2005 p. 4), and is an activity that can be done by and for oneself (Wallace, 1991). Professional development usually takes place after finishing formal training for the purpose of keeping up to date with advancements in language teaching and research (Crandall, 2001).

Once in the context of the workplace, new teachers are responsible for their own development since they may not be as close to the sources of information as they were back at the language teaching program. In response to this, there are a number of resources available to become better-informed language teaching professionals such as (a) participating in professional language teaching associations, (b) subscribing to journals, (c) participating in electronic discussion groups, (d) making use of on-line teaching and learning resources, (e) working on institutional committees charged with curriculum or materials development, (f) working collaboratively with experienced colleagues, and (g) doing action research.

a) Professional Language Teaching Associations

Through professional associations, language teachers can take part in workshops, seminars, and conferences where they can make contact with colleagues from other institutions and exchange ideas and experiences. Attending conferences gives teachers the opportunity to create networks and make links with professionals who share different and similar perspectives, and who may be willing to exchange experiences and teaching ideas. Most of these associations are organized into groups that address special topics such as the teaching of English for academic purposes (EAP), computer-assisted language learning (CALL), and reading research and teaching, to name but a few. Additionally, there are usually interesting book exhibits from publishers who display their best materials and resources for teaching and conducting research in the language teaching field. Often, there are sample materials that teachers can examine and about which they can ask questions related to their practicality in the classroom.

The International Association of Teachers of English as a Foreign Language (IATEFL) attracts teachers, language program administrators, researchers and authors from many parts of the globe every year to Great Britain (<http://www.iatefl.org>). Each of its fourteen Special Interest

Groups (SIGs) brings out their own publications and holds pre-conference events, which includes their Open Forum. The association maintains a website where information about events from affiliated organizations, jobs, training programs and scholarships is found. IATEFL publishes past papers from previous conferences. Members of IATEFL receive a free publication at no cost upon their registration.

The TESOL (Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages) international association offers a wide range of activities for language teachers, such as SIGs, institutes, job lists and fairs which serve as a converging point for potential employers and employees (<http://www.tesol.org>). Additionally, TESOL publishes books, journals, newsletters, and other periodicals that aim at reaching different communities within the language teaching field. Its extensive website provides a substantial number of services – to name a few: an on-line bookstore, a news section containing a calendar of events, blogs, scholarships, more recently a resource center to which teachers from around the world can make contributions. TESOL has affiliates worldwide. These affiliates usually issue their own journal and/or newsletter and organize special interests groups.

CALICO, (Computer Assisted Language Instruction Consortium) is also a professional organization that mainly advocates instruction efforts in both language education and technology. CALICO's membership is made up of foreign language educators, web page designers, CALL programmers and technicians, language software developers, new CALL users, and second language acquisition researchers. To reach its members, CALICO publishes an important journal three times a year and now has a monograph series. Every year, CALICO celebrates its international Conferences, where many professionals can offer different modalities of presentations on educational technology as it is applied to teaching and learning languages (<https://www.calico.org>). The following are CALICO's Special Interest Groups:

- Courseware
- CMC – Computer-Assisted Communication
- Teacher Education
- ICALL – Intelligent Computer Assisted Language Learning
- InSTIL – Speech Recognition
- SLAT – Second Language Acquisition and Technology

The International Association of Applied Linguistics (AILA is the acronym for *Association Internationale de Linguistique Appliquée*) has affiliates in 35 countries, of which the American Association (<http://www.aal.org>) and the British Association (<http://www.baal.org.uk>) of Applied Linguistics are part. The primary goal of the association is to research and propose the best practical solutions to everyday problems related to language and communication, such as bilingualism or multilingualism, second language acquisition, language variation, and literacy. AILA publishes AILA News, the AILA Review and the Applied Linguistics Series (<http://www.aila.info>). Among other resources, AILA offers a calendar of events and a list of job opportunities. Moreover, the association's webpage is now offering dictionaries, fonts and tools for International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA) transcriptions and language corpora.

Teachers may find the language teaching events organized by professional associations an important antidote to teacher burnout. Motivation and creativity are very likely to be stimulated through refreshing workshops, demonstrations and research findings. I personally find it a good opportunity to discuss my ideas about a present teaching concern, and once I am back to my regular duties, I start to plan how I can adapt and incorporate my newly acquired knowledge into my teaching context.

Presenting about adaptations of ideas gained from colleagues, our own ideas, and/or (action) research outcomes at conferences is an equally important opportunity for us to develop ourselves as language teaching professionals. After my first two years of attending conferences, I learned the value of informally sharing my thoughts about the positive results I had obtained and the challenges I had faced in my few years of teaching. I started to go to conferences with a different perspective: I wanted to learn how fellow professionals turned *their* work in their classrooms into insights that were worth sharing with others in this profession. I soon found that many of my ideas could work in different contexts, and with the help of some of the colleagues I met while attending conferences, I started, myself, to present at different local events in Venezuela.

(b) Journals for Language Teachers

Professional publications are a constant source of fresh information about innovations and developments. Journals normally focus on specific areas, such as methodology in language teaching, research, and others. Through on-line and printed journals, teachers can establish communication with professionals in different parts of the globe by submitting articles and reviews or simply reading about the ideas that fellow teachers come up with and that are worth disseminating.

TESOL Quarterly (<http://www.tesol.org>) is a refereed publication concerning second and foreign language teaching. Its readership includes researchers, applied linguists, language teacher educators, teacher learners, and English to speakers of other languages (ESOL) teachers. Research, theoretical and teaching methodology articles, as well as articles and books reviews, and articles responses are published in this journal.

The Internet TESL Journal (<http://iteslj.org/>) offers a wide range of practical articles and such resources as lessons, techniques, teaching materials, games, questions, numerous links to useful web pages and jokes for ESOL teachers.

Humanistic Language Teaching (<http://www.hltmag.co.uk/>) is an extremely wide-ranging e-magazine with short and long articles on almost any aspect of foreign language teaching (including TESOL) and learning that you can think of.

Another popular periodical among ESOL teachers is *English Teaching Professional* (<http://www.etprofessional.com>). This bi-monthly magazine features articles that address practical teaching techniques, reviews of books and other products, and practical teaching tips, among other useful items. The topics include young learners, English for business and technology, and articles of general interest for teachers.

Also, the *English Language Teaching Journal* (ELTJ) is a noteworthy publication. Research-based, theoretical and practical articles on English as a second language (ESL) methodology, language, classroom management, sociology and psychology are published four times a year (<http://www.etprofessional.com>).

The Modern Language Journal (<http://polyglot.lss.wisc.edu/mlj/index.htm>), published by Blackwell Publishers (<http://www.blackwellpublishing.com>), is a refereed, quarterly periodical that mainly addresses topics on foreign languages, although it publishes research, theoretical, response and review articles on TESL/TEFL as well.

The *CALICO Journal* (<https://www.calico.org>) has articles focusing on research and discussion on technology and language teaching and learning. The journal is also refereed and publishes research articles as well as software reviews, and professional news. The *CALICO Journal* is published three times a year.

The *Annual Review of Applied Linguistics* (<http://journals.cambridge.org/action/login>) provides research reviews in relevant areas in applied linguistics, with invited contributions being compiled in volumes devoted to specific themes.

All in all, there is a wide range of English language teaching and applied linguistics journals – I have mentioned only a few – which cater for different tastes and interests, and reading them can valuably influence one's teaching beliefs and performance. For similar reasons, it can be valuable to write, with a view to contributing to one of these publications. Writing about our own teaching practice or reporting findings from our research can help other teachers who may have needs similar to ours. And *writing* for journals brings about important professional developmental benefits too. Through writing, we teachers can learn about and define our own beliefs and teaching practices. Writing is, after all, well-known to be an excellent means to reflection.

c) Electronic Forums and Teacher Support/Discussion Groups

The possibility of receiving quick responses is probably the most important advantage of electronic forums and teacher support or discussion groups. A large number of language teachers around the globe exchange materials and techniques, share episodes of success and failure, and discuss hot topics in language teaching. Furthermore, interaction with other professionals on-line is a way to learn about other resources, which may offer valuable information that can enhance teaching practice.

The TESL-L forum (<http://listserv.cuny.edu>) was founded in 1991. Today, more than 32,000 language teachers in 172 countries convene to discuss issues related to TESL/TEFL. Depending on the teachers' particular focus, special-interest sub-lists of TESL-L may be joined:

- TESLCA-L (Computer technology and TESL)
- TESLMW-L (Materials Writers)
- TESP-L (English for Specific Purposes)

ELTeCS (<http://www.britishcouncil.org/eltecs.htm>) is a network that hosts over 15,000 ELT professionals around the globe. Major activities include the exchange of information about ELT such resources as online materials, journals, teaching tips, events, among others. The following are sub-lists within ELTeCS:

- Africa and the Middle East
- East Asia
- Europe, Caucasus and Russia
- India and Sri Lanka
- Latin America
- Central and South Asia.

The Computer-Assisted Language Learning Interest Section (CALL-IS) of the TESOL international association (<http://www.call-is.org/moodle>) addresses theoretical and research topics in the field of computer-mediated language instruction. In addition, CALL-IS has organized the Electronic Village On-line (EVO) every year since 2003. EVO offers free on-line training in different language teaching areas.

Teachers interested in theoretical and applied linguistics will find the LINGUIST list a useful resource. Through the list (<http://linguistlist.org/LL/subs-linguist.cfm>), many events (conferences, seminars, etc.) in these areas are regularly posted as well.

d) On-line Teaching and Learning Resources

The number of websites that could be listed for ESL/EFL teachers are endless. Many of them have been design to provide resources that meet specific interests. Conscious of this, the following are but a small sample of some well-known and more useful websites:

- <http://www.eslcafe.com>
 - For teachers: teachers' forums, trainers' forums, job lists, tips and techniques
 - For students: help center, idioms, phrasal verbs, quizzes
 - For everyone: photo galleries, podcasts, chat rooms, related links
- <http://oregonstate.edu/~healeyd>
 - Presentation summaries, handouts and materials with lists of links about software selection, teaching with CALL, lesson plans templates, links to pronunciation websites, sites for students of different levels of proficiency, courses taught by Dr Healey on methodology, reading and writing.
 - Numerous lists of recently launched links
 - Information about teacher training through the English language Institute (ELI) and related links
- <http://www.esl-lab.com>
 - Easy-to-use listening materials and activities: conversations, trailers, advertisements, music, quizzes
 - Links for free software for practicing listening
 - ESP listening and vocabulary exercises
- <http://onestopenGLISH.com>
 - ESP, EAP, ESL, EFL materials and resources: News, lessons, flashcards, games, exams; listening, speaking reading and writing activities. Grammar and vocabulary exercises
 - Job opportunities
 - Forums and competitions
 - Articles for teachers
- <http://owl.english.purdue.edu>
 - Free writing resources and instructional materials: writing/composition steps, formatting and style guidelines (APA, MLA), plagiarism information, business letters, Grammar and Mechanics
 - Teaching Writing
 - Research on writing and writing about research
 - ESL resources
 - Job Search and Professional Writing
- <http://a4esl.org>
 - Interesting variety of activities for ESL students: Exercises, games, (bilingual and English-only) quizzes and tests
 - Links to related TESL/TEFL websites
 - Podcasts
- <http://www.eslflow.com>
 - Wide range of resources for ESL teachers: Materials grouped by topics (food and eating, relationships, housing, health and the body, etc.), and skills, icebreakers, lesson plans, games, among others.
 - Materials and exercises for standardized tests

- A very friendly job post section with personalized help: Teachers' profiles, notification of employment, job forum (all of it free of charge!)
- Helpful and reader-friendly teaching methodology articles for teachers
- Links to excellent related web pages

Today, the advantages of using on-line resources are not a secret for ELT professionals. The strong websites listed in this section offer valuable information that can help teachers in planning their curricula and lessons in ways that were never thought before. Many of these resources can be adapted for a specific topic or level, or just ready to print and use. Teacher and students can also go directly to the webpage and practice exercises with interactive software. Teachers' creativity is the limit!

e) Institutional Committees

Whether we work in a school or some other setting (e.g., ministry of education's language division, state/regional department of education), participating in institutional committees brings about knowledge and experience that can positively impact beliefs and practices of language teachers. Joining the curricular committee of my institution opened the door for me to varied learning experiences. I had the opportunity to learn about the process of curriculum design for a particular situation in a real context and about the role in this process of educational theory. This was also a stimulus for me to articulate my beliefs (e.g., about syllabuses and teaching generally) with colleagues and with curriculum specialists in my institution, which was a unique experience that strengthened my skills as a manager of teaching and learning experiences. I have had access to new materials and to samples and presentations by publishers that have stimulated my creativity and helped me generate ideas for self-made materials that I have now implemented in my classrooms.

Other potential benefits of joining institutional committees are opportunities to develop language program administration leadership skills. Many times program directors, department heads, or supervisors develop plans for program enhancement that requires the collaboration of teachers that can help support the project. The first time I took part of a teacher training project I was charged with the responsibility to learn about ways of training teachers to administer a new placement exam. Some time after the experience I realized that I had learned to negotiate with those in positions with power to make decisions.

f) Working Collaboratively with Experienced Colleagues

The experience of successful teachers can serve those who are entering the profession as models of good practice (Richards & Farrell, 2005; Park, Oliver, Johnson, Graham, & Oppong, 2007). Collaborative work between novice and experienced teachers catalyzes the professional growth of the former in particular and provides a first hand source of knowledge. Experienced teachers can mentor and encourage new ones as they work together.

Partnerships with experienced teachers can take several forms. Dialogues among teachers are a usual source of learning. Experienced teachers' stories about students, curriculum, parents, administration, evaluation, and professional development can be used by new teachers for reflection. Plainly, this has potential to help new teachers avoid undesirable results as they also start their journey as educators. It is an additional possibility that experienced teachers may take the initiative and talk about their past successes and failures accompanied with recommendations – in which case new teachers should feel lucky!

Peer coaching is another form of collaborative work that new and experienced teachers

can adopt to pursue professional development. When pairs or teams of teachers agree on working together, they need to plan their time to meet, research, and give support. Coaches (the experienced teachers) and consulting teachers usually team teach classes, where the latter has the opportunity to see a skilled teacher perform in the same context as hers. Coaching teachers, on the other hand, are to observe their peers. The coach's responsibility as an observer in this context is to provide feedback that helps the consulting teacher improve a specific area. Richards and Farrell (2005) suggest that for peer coaching to be a successful practice, the teachers involved need to have a degree of confidence that allows them to talk openly about their concerns. The new teacher needs to be able to welcome feedback from the experienced teacher, who in turn needs to be positive and supportive throughout the activities that both of them engage in.

g) *Doing Action Research*

Action research (AR) is a smaller, more personal form of inquiry that can help ESL/EFL teachers increase their understanding on their own practices. The findings obtained can be useful for improving basically any aspect of teaching and learning that we want, or need, to focus on – potential or perceived problems in our classroom, for example.

Even though the steps involved in carrying out AR are in essence the same for pre-service and for in-service teachers, the objectives and the applications of the findings differ to a degree. While pre-service teachers have the goal of preparing for future practice where they will be charged with more and more complex responsibilities than those in their practicum, in-service teachers may be analyzing familiar teaching and learning issues. In either case, we:

1. Identify an aspect of our teaching, or one aspect of our students' learning for research that we perceive as needing improvement.
2. Decide on the selection of a specific research method.
3. Plan, design and implement data collection techniques and instruments.
4. Plan and implement an action plan for change.
5. Evaluate any changes.
6. Report our results.

AR should not be regarded as an activity conducted by only by experts with specialized training who spend their time in laboratories. It needs to be seen as an extension of language teaching that all of us who work in language classrooms can carry out. Burns (1999) points out that AR is also “participatory as it provides for collaborative investigation by teams of colleagues, practitioners and researchers” (p 30) that can help teacher communities resolve a greater number of teaching and learning issues. For further reading on AR in professional development see Burns, 1999; & Richards & Farrell, 2005). Some of the journals mentioned above, as well as the *Teacher Trainer*, can also tell you more!

Concluding Remarks

With regards to professional development, Crandall (2001) states that completing a language teaching program is “the beginning of a lifetime of professional growth” (p. 551). This article highlights only a small sample of the many resources that can play a role in promoting this kind of life long learning for language teachers. Though the array of options may seem overwhelming, you might begin by exploring just a small sample, and go farther or deeper as your needs and interests dictate.

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