“You Can Be a Better Teacher”: The Role of Learner-Feedback in Fostering CPD Practices

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Abstract

English language teachers at tertiary level in India, especially in private institutions are challenged by many impediments in their professional development endeavours. Challenges usually surge from the institutional expectations and the professional demands. This paper in the form of an ethnographic study presents the case of an English teacher who re-discovered her positive beliefs and revised and redesigned her teaching and professional development plans owing to a non-formal feedback she obtained from her students. The study documents how non-formal feedback from learners initiate various reflective practices and how it contributes to the designing of a plan for continuing professional development.

Keywords: CPD, non-formal learner-feedback, reflection, reflective practice, teacher diaries

Introduction

Continuing Professional Development (CPD) is defined as the process by which individually or collectively the teachers acquire and develop “critically the knowledge, skills and emotional intelligence essential to good professional thinking, planning and practice” (Day, 1999, p. 4). Research in CPD practices looks at various aspects that affect the individual teacher’s action plans. One such study (Walter & Briggs, 2012), which analysed results of 35 evidence-based studies, revealed that professional development that makes most difference to the teachers is concrete and classroom based, brings in expertise from outside the institution, involves teachers in the areas of choices and activities to
undertake, enables active peer collaboration, and provides mentoring and training opportunities. The report also states that an effective CPD plan is sustained over time and is supported by effective institutional leadership.

Educational policies, politics and administration reflect the interest the teaching profession has in teachers’ professional development priorities (Padwad & Dixit, 2014). Teacher priorities, institution priorities and profession priorities are not always balanced. In many cases, the teacher priorities are less focused owing to the demands that get generated from the other two. In such circumstances, the teachers experience great difficulty in advancing with their CPD plans for they may have to fulfil many expectations of their institutions and also of the policies. CPD may not always be a top down approach where the teachers are supported by the institution to enhance professional development practices (Stannard & Matharu, 2014).

The context in the present study is representative of many of the private institutions in India. There are impediments in terms of time, syllabus constraints and administrative responsibilities for teachers to reach out to CPD practices such as attending seminars, workshops, conferences or peer collaboration and mentoring. One factor on which teachers of such institutions depend on is the feedback collected from students by the institution. An issue with a generic feedback is that it will not give specific information about teaching practices or the teaching style.

This paper examines how a non-formal learner-feedback effectively contributes to the teacher’s CPD plans. Teachers have to reflect on the feedback and on their teaching to devise an action plan that positively contributes to their professional growth. Reflective practices are important in continuing teachers’ professional development because teaching experience alone does not assure improved practices (Nguyen, 2017; Widodo & Ferdiansyah, 2018). Fundamental premises behind reflective practices are that they will enable teachers to apply theory to practice, guide to improve classroom practices and help practitioners to grow professionally by continuously learning from classroom related experience (Cirocki & Farrell, 2017). Learner-feedback can trigger teachers’ reflective practices and it can help them to exert positive attributes to their teaching and professional development plans.
Review of Literature

Non-formal Learner-feedback

Obtaining feedback from learners is one of the CPD practices that any teacher can take up. It is stated that “giving feedback for teachers is learner training and it helps them to take responsibility for their learning” (British Council, 2014). Teachers can obtain feedback from their learners either orally or in writing. In this study, the nature of feedback analysed is oral and it is non-formal. The nature of the feedback is identified as non-formal because even though it is not a formal feedback with proper structure and has some personal tone to it and was unsolicited at first, the feedback had a structure within. That means, the feedback was not randomly a comment on a teacher’s performance in the classroom but it had a pattern that was over a period of time. Moreover, the students were keen on observing and participating in classroom activities and were willing to answer questions while the teacher sought clarifications for certain statements. One notices change and maturity over time at micro level as a result of feedback and reflection and she succinctly states that maturity comes with time and reflection.

Importance of Reflective Practice in CPD

Reflective practice can be defined as “thinking about classroom events, experiences or critical incidents, before, during and after their occurrence, in ways that allow for deep introspection and evaluation” (Cirocki & Widodo, 2019, p. 17). Teaching is a process based on a series of comprehensibly connected units called lessons. Reflection, therefore, has to be “a continuous process of reviewing teaching and learning to enable practitioners to make connections between experiences” (p. 19). A four-component typology of reflection: reflection-before-lesson, reflection-during-lesson, reflection-after-lesson and reflection-beyond-lesson proposed by Cirocki and Widodo (2019) delineates a possible categorization of reflection.

Reflection-before-lesson helps teachers to attempt a needs analysis and plan the lesson addressing the possible challenges. Reflection-during-lesson pertains to “both positive and negative surprises that come about in the teaching-learning process” and “the teacher’s ability to deal with [them] when they occur” (p. 9). Reflection-after-lesson enables the teacher to define what they observed in the classroom, review teaching and classroom decisions made and to state to themselves what would
be done differently if the teacher were to take the class once again. The final type, reflection-beyond-lesson assists teachers to make use of all the other three types of reflection and to share their observations with mentors or other practitioners for collaborative reflection. There is a need to understand and analyse how non-formal learner-feedback can initiate reflective practices and how this affects the CPD practices of teachers.

Methodology

Aim of the Study

The study aims to find how non-formal learner-feedback influences the teacher’s reflective practices and how teacher reflections result in positive changes in attitude subsequently ensuring the framing of a CPD plan.

Assumptions

This study is based on the following assumptions:

- A generic feedback from learners may not inform teachers of the areas in which they need to improve and therefore obtaining non-formal learner-feedback may be effective.
- Non-formal learner-feedback may function as a trigger for the teacher’s reflective practice and such reflective practices may lead to a revision of teaching and CPD plans.

Research Questions

The study attempts to answer the following questions:

- How does non-formal learner-feedback correlate with the teacher’s reflective practice?
- What is the effect of reflective practice on CPD plans?

Research Design

Approach

The duration of the present study was six months. This study which was conceived as an ethnographic case study with three teachers but was ultimately carried out with one teacher-participant. Willingness to share data was a constraint owing to which the other two participants withdrew from the study. The nature of data demanded openness from the participants to accept flaws in teaching as well as share the feedback the students provided individually as well as the generic one given by the institution.
She stated that she believes in teaching engineering students values and ethics along with her syllabus and she opted for English teaching as her career though she was a graduate in Physics.

**Table 1: Details of the participant and the courses taught**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant's age</th>
<th>32</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Qualifications</td>
<td>MA, Ph.D.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Experience</td>
<td>Seven years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Experience in the present institution</td>
<td>Two years</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| Courses taught in the present institution | Course 1: Basic Proficiency Course  
Course 2: English for Professional Communication |

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Nature of Course 1</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Functional communication  
Language games  
Discussions  
More speaking based  
Less technical writing |

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Nature of Course 2</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Challenging course  
CV writing, SoP writing, Interview skills, Group Discussions,  
Presentation skills  
More technical and academic writing  
Less chances of “light discussions and infotainment” (Teacher participant stated in the background discussion) |

**Table 2: Details of the setting of the study**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of the institution</th>
<th>Private Engineering Institution</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Impediments to CPD practices | - Academic, administrative and co-curricular responsibilities resulting in time constraints  
- Leave policies regarding workshops, conferences and seminars attendance during semester period  
- Lack of peer collaboration |

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Existing CPD support</th>
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| Generic feedback from students based on defined parameters.  
Rating scale markings analysed, quantified and given to teachers |

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Issues with the support measure</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Generic feedback  
No opportunities for students to give descriptive feedback  
Feedback does not provide accurate information about the reasons for the students’ choices  
Feedback does not give insights into many aspects of language teaching because it is a generic one for all teachers of all subjects. |
Data Collection Tools
An audio recorded background discussion with the participant, the teacher’s notes on the non-formal feedback, the teacher’s diary entries and an audio recorded final discussion with the participant were the tools used in this study to collect data.

Data Analysis
Important episodes from the background discussion (coded as BD) were transcribed and major issues related to the existing teaching and CPD practices of the teacher were obtained. From the teacher’s notes (coded as TN), the nature of learner feedback was identified and highlighted. The teacher’s reflections from the diary entries (coded as TD) were thematically identified and analysed. Important episodes of the final discussion (coded as FD) were transcribed and used to corroborate the data obtained by other data collection tools.

Analysis of Background Discussion
The teacher-participant during the discussion stated that as a teacher she had satisfaction in the semester that she had just completed. She also mentioned that the students were equally happy about the classes and the higher percentage of attendance made it evident that they were motivated and they enjoyed the lectures. She observed that on the final day of the semester in her class, she asked how the students evaluated the course and classes and she received positive feedback.

I was overwhelmed by the comments the students made. Many of them remembered most of my classes ... They suggested that I need to improve my ICT skills... the rest of the comments from all the students were positive. I felt very confident...and I felt that I was doing a good job. (BD)

She reiterated that the oral feedback given by the students correlated with what they provided to the college authorities. Figure 1 provides the data obtained through the generic feedback form given to the students by the institution.
She received a feedback as high as 92 per cent and this enhanced her positive self-appraisal. She further stated:

... most of the days I left the class with great satisfaction... I enjoyed all the classes as I had the freedom to choose or adapt materials to teach the syllabus (BD)

The teacher-participant had to teach many of the students from the previous batch in the immediate semester that followed it. One month into the course, during the background discussion, she stated that she was unable to enjoy teaching the course. She found the students to be uninterested in the classroom tasks. About this she commented that

No students were happy as they were in the previous semester. They many times mentioned that the classes were boring. Although, I tried making it interesting, because of the nature of the topics in the syllabus, I could not keep them interested. In the previous semester, the topics in the syllabus had much more possibilities of having higher order discussions. For me, I felt the present syllabus to be restrictive and limited in its scope. (BD)

She asserted that the dissatisfaction was mounting and it started affecting her morale as a teacher. To understand what was wrong with her teaching, she opened up a discussion in one of her classes and asked students to approach her individually if they could give her any constructive feedback.
The background discussion provided insight into the teacher’s beliefs about her classroom practices and it correlated with the generic feedback recorded by the institution as well as with the oral feedback she received from the class. However, the discussion clearly highlighted how her teacher efficacy was questioned and how it affected the classroom teaching and learning. The teacher’s notes on the individual student’s feedback was much more informative.

**Analysis of the Teacher’s Notes on Non-formal Learner-feedback**

The non-formal learner-feedback received by the teacher raised a few issues in her teaching. The teacher noted:

> He said that to “teach a class without proper preparation a teacher must have a great deal of experience”. It actually meant that the students felt that I do not prepare for classes. And he said that I do not state the teaching objectives clearly at the beginning. Nor do I conclude the session properly. He compared me with another teacher who substituted me for a day. He said that I failed to gather all the points discussed in the classroom and to give them a proper orientation. (TN-December 23, 2018)

From this excerpt it is clear that the students felt that the teacher did not plan her lessons well. The teacher added:

> He also mentioned that he missed those “thought-provoking classes” and went on to say that I have stopped discussing anything which has ethical value. I asked him to clarify this point and he said that I stopped mentioning great works in literature, stopped discussing the importance of being humane. Then I realized that in fact these days I go to class to teach them the syllabus. There are no embedded values or concerns in my classes anymore. (sic. TN-December 23, 2018)

Further she observed:

> The student also told me that I am being repetitive in my class and there is nothing new in my class. The students find it boring. Discussions are not guided and concentrating on writing has, in his
words, “made your teaching a matter of fact affair. Just teaching for the sake of teaching”. This is tough for me to handle. I need to think about my teaching. (sic. TN-December 23, 2018)

The non-formal feedback that the teacher received pointed at in sufficient preparation, lack of planning the sessions, and absence of a hidden curriculum. The teacher’s reflection on the feedback and her own teaching practice were analysed from the diary entries.

Analysis of the Teacher’s Diary

The teacher’s diary had information about her reflection and the entries were thematically analysed.

Reflection-before-lesson

The teacher stated in the diary that she began to think about the aim of the particular lesson, its outcomes, materials, activities, approaches and methods to be adopted and classroom management.

Tomorrow the session is on writing a statement of purpose. I think I need to generalize the word “purpose” first and then to narrow it down to the specific task. I can ask them about the purpose of life and can tell them a story quickly. Then ask them what is meant by SoP. Just a 10-minute initiation like that may get me their attention rather than me directly entering the class and teach them the aspects of SoP. (TD, January 8, 2019)

There were similar entries in the diary for the later lessons which focused on her thoughts regarding materials, activities and classroom management decisions.

Reflection-during-lesson

There were not many entries which could be classified into this category. However, there is one entry which specified the teacher’s intention to find ongoing solutions for issues that arise in class while the lesson is in progress.

Today, I understood that I am always thinking about the lesson as a comprehensive unit. I also found myself thinking about possible issues or challenges that may come up as a part of my teacher talk. For example today, in class I made a statement about anima/animus when we were discussing gender discrimination. The moment I stated it and elaborated I knew that one of them was going to ask
me about transgenders. I was unprepared but I could still manage because I kept thinking about what I was discussing. (Sic. TD February 12, 2019)

Thinking about what she was discussing in the classroom showed that she was reflecting while the lesson was in progress.

**Reflection-after-lesson**

Most of the teacher’s diary entries belonged to this category. The teacher after every class entered a lengthy description of her thoughts about the class.

In one such entry, she pointed out:

> I have to ask learners to bring in materials of their choice and fine tune them. May be, I should flip the classroom. I have to give them some homework which does not feel like a burden for them. May be something like the funny videos about interviews or group discussions and then ask them to give it to me at least a day before the class. I can find good and bad things about the topic and give credit to the students who bring it in. This may encourage them to be more involved. (TD. February 20, 2019)

In another entry she stated:

> I have to restart my reading. Need to read more news items, journals, need to improve my vision of the world. I should not stand without answers in class…A challenging group of students is what I need… And I think I should help them to be that challenging batch. I need to give them food for thought. Probably I can give them a percept every day. It may be out of syllabus but …Something that can make a difference. (TD. February 12, 2019)

It is evident here that she has started devising a plan for her professional development.

**Reflection-beyond-lesson**

The teacher-participant’s plan for her CPD is visible in some of the diary entries where she concisely stated her plans to go beyond the usual practices and designed a plan of action.

That day after his feedback, I had thought about me as a teacher. My image in the classroom and my image to myself. I have to continue learning. I have to overcome the hurdles here…May be, I need to seek
online help from my friends. There may not be many who will share things. But at least I should shed my ego and reach out to see how others plan their development as a teacher. (Sic.TD. February 6, 2019)

The teacher later wrote:

There are possibilities. Like a WhatsApp group of all of us who are prepared to share information about our teaching and classroom life. Like in the past some kind of a department discussion where we can all share things. The seniors may offer suggestions. I need to think of a portfolio as well. At least that can help me not to be repetitive. I can make a material bank… It can make my existence as a teacher more realistic. (TD. March 15, 2019)

Analysis of the final discussion also revealed the teacher’s CPD plans. She mentioned in this discussion that she ceased to be a knowledge enthusiast. Further she added:

The conferences, workshops and seminars that I attended were effective but alone they were not sufficient to make positive changes in my professional growth. Now after receiving the feedback from the student, I reviewed all the previous plans and actions…to have my professional development…realizing the shortcomings of my plan. I believed that meeting other teachers and researchers would benefit me... I now feel that within the institution there should be a "teacher sorority" where active knowledge sharing and a kind of mentoring happen. (FD)

The teacher-participant stated in the final discussion that she had invited a senior colleague to observe her classes from the forthcoming semester onwards and to give her feedback. She also mentioned that she wanted to formulate a few parameters on which she wished to be judged by the colleague and a discussion after the class would help her to get more descriptive data on various aspects of her teaching.

Findings

From the analysis of data, it was evident that the non-formal learner-feedback was more descriptive in nature compared to the data obtained through the prescriptive format given to the students by the institution. Such descriptive feedback on her teaching enabled the teacher to think and reflect about her teaching practices. The teacher’s notes on the feedback itself adduce that she was able to analyse the feedback
positively and not dismiss it as criticism. It reiterates the proposition that learner-feedback can affect a positive change on teaching practices which in turn enhances professional development.

The diary entries provided substantial evidence for her reflective practices where she consciously made it a rule to think through the sessions and to reflect upon them. In the final discussion, she clearly stated that she began planning her sessions more effectively and encouraged the learners to bring in materials. Flipping the classroom was another way in which she decided to affect a change in the mode of teaching. Involving learners into the classroom activities by entrusting them charge of their own learning, which includes materials selection, is a step towards fostering learner autonomy. The idea she posited as “giving food for thought” is particularly of great academic interest as enhancing higher order thinking skills is the crux of any educational system. Thus, planning the lessons, flipping the classroom, learner-chosen materials, and activating the schema with a percept were the teacher’s plans which had a direct impact on students in the classroom.

Her entries in the diaries also highlighted her endeavours to reach out for suggestions to senior colleagues. Her decision to create a WhatsApp group with her teacher-friends is an initiative taken to develop herself professionally through collaboration and informal mentoring. The department group also has its potential in developing active collaboration among the teachers by sharing classroom/teaching experiences and by offering various strategies they employ in classes. Creating a portfolio is another aspect that the teacher mentioned in the diary and in the discussion. A teacher portfolio and its critical examination at regular intervals will enable the teachers to derive insights into their own development as teachers, mentors and as material designers.

These findings imply that reflective practices of teachers can be activated, if learner-feedback is internalized in such a way that the teachers introspect their teaching practices and identify patterns in their classroom transactions. Thus, the results of this study correlate with what Cirocki and Widodo (2019) postulated about the development of CPD through reflective practices. Furthermore, the study offers a plausible solution for the issues of imbalance between the teacher, profession and institution priorities (Padwad & Dixit, 2014).
Conclusion

It is evident from the data analysis of the present study that student feedback can be an eye-opener for many teachers to rethink their current teaching practices. It definitely depends on how the teacher perceives the feedback and thus the teacher’s attitude is very important while reviewing the feedback. If teachers can encourage students to provide feedback about their teaching, it will be a credible pool of data. Most of the time, the verbal feedback from the students is more honest and precise than their written feedback. Feedback also depends on the level of comfort that learners and teachers have in their communication. As learners are the centre of the educational system, their opinions and evaluations must be valued. Especially at tertiary level, students are able to make judgments based on their analysis of the classroom dynamics. Therefore, the teachers must take it as a privilege to use such observations or judgments, after careful scrutiny of the comments or criticism obtained, and attempt to excel in their profession by designing their professional development plans.

Borg (2015) contends that CPD practices will be more meaningful if teachers recognize CPD as an integral part of their work and they take the importance of inquiry and reflection as central to their continuing professional growth. It is argued that teachers must continuously scrutinize and review their beliefs, and they must discern CPD as an ongoing process rather than perceiving it as a periodic event. Furthermore, Borg maintains that motivation for professional learning actually generates from student learning. From this study, it is evident that as much as CPD practices enhance students’ learning experiences and outcome, student feedback on teaching enables positive CPD practices of teachers.

References


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