

THE CURRENT CLIMATE OF PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT AMONG ENGLISH LANGUAGE UNIVERSITY INSTRUCTORS

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ABSTRACT

Due to the emphasis on English education in Korean society, most universities have required English courses for students. Many of these courses are run by native speakers from around the world with diverse backgrounds. Some of these universities require professional development or publishing in order to earn a promotion or to keep one's job secure. Other universities appear to have no emphasis on professional development, while others may discourage it entirely. However, while the opportunities for growth and development exist, it appears that only some instructors take part in professional development. In this study, I attempt to understand the who and the why of professional development among these English professors. I look at the current perceived importance of PD, the professional training that many participate in, and the diverse motivations for participation.

Keywords: professional development, university, ESL, teacher training

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Across South Korea, English language instructors at universities come from diverse backgrounds not only in terms of their passport countries, but also in terms of their educational backgrounds and motivations for relocating to Korea. Therefore, it is not an easy task to find commonalities across the board outside of the simple label of English instructors at universities.

Before I began my career in tertiary education, I was a student of Education in the United States with an emphasis on K-12 students. There was a clear and evident significance placed on professional development (PD) for teachers, with the last course being dedicated to the idea of teachers as researchers in their own classrooms. Through this course, all students completed the steps for an action research project. This experience gave future educators the tools and confidence for continual development in the classroom. Upon completion of this program, students earn a K-12 teaching license and a Master of Education. In order to maintain this teacher's license, it is required to participate in and document a certain number of hours of professional development each year.

As I transitioned into tertiary education in South Korea, I presumed there would be a similar level of attention given to professional development. However, after working in higher education for almost a decade in both public and private universities, in the capital and out in the provinces, it has become very evident that there is no cohesive policy with regards to professional development for English instructors at universities in Korea, as well as varying

levels of encouragement and even discouragement towards PD. Nevertheless, there is still an active community of educators participating in professional development across the country.

2.0 BACKGROUND

Professional development can take on a plethora of forms, such as “workshops, seminars... mentoring peer observation and coaching, networking, and collaborative work” (Colbert et al., 2008). DESIMONE describes professional development as experiences that “range from formal, structured seminars on in-service days to everyday, informal hallway discussions with other teachers” (2011). Sparks wrote that PD “engages the intellect, involves all teachers in cycles of action and reflection” (2004). All of this time spent on developing as an educator has one “ultimate goal: improvements in student learning outcomes” (Guskey, 2003).

Due to this all-encompassing nature of PD, it is difficult to measure its effectiveness. Guskey compiled research from educational publications in search of the factors for effective PD (2003). On the “lists of the characteristics of effective professional development” from the compiled information, two factors are most frequently cited: effective PD will foster 1) teachers’ understanding of academic content and 2) teachers’ understanding of the ways students learn (Guskey, 2003).

Collegiality and collaboration at the school-level are other important factors in professional development. “Organizational support at the school level significantly predicted the level of professional development impact after controlling for teacher efficacy and years of teaching experience” (Eun & Heining-Boynnton, 2007). “Effective professional development encourages teachers to collaborate.” (Colbert et al., 2008). “Teachers in schools that have embraced this system of professional development... enjoy the benefits of supportive, collegial interaction” (Sparks, 2004). By working together, educators can “develop and evaluate the programs and methods that are most successful in their school” (Jensen, 2012).

While much research about professional development paints a positive picture, Hill found that ““In many studies, teacher attendance at professional development has not been associated with gains in student outcomes” (2009). One reason for this may be that for many educators, PD is mandatory, with the requirement of attending specific events or seminars. These activities are required, but “it is often the case that they are not involved in selecting and planning those activities, and that professional development may not be closely tied to classroom practice” (Colbert, et al., 2008).

One form of PD that puts teachers in control of their own growth as professionals is action research. Action research allows teachers to act as researchers in their own classroom. McDonough’s study of action research amongst teaching assistants (TAs) who taught in language classrooms showed that by involving TAs in research in this way, they had opportunities for reflections and led them to seek answers themselves to their questions (2006). “TAs gained a broader understanding of research, developed an appreciation for peer collaboration, and adopted new L2 teaching practices” (McDonough, 2006). Nunan wrote that action research aids in positively changing the relationships between students and teachers to aid in the growth of teacher’s instructional practices (1992).

3.0 METHODOLOGY

For this research, thirty-five educators who work in tertiary education in South Korea completed a survey, and four of those respondents participated in an interview. All participation in the study was voluntary, and participants were recruited through a facebook group for professors in South Korea, as well as by word of mouth. For the purposes of this research, four respondents were removed due to incomplete answers or due to an overlap of workplaces, therefore the data from the 31 remaining participants will be discussed here.

Twelve people reported that they had earned a PhD, and 19 had earned a Master's Degree. Participants were asked what type of institution they work at, and 11 responded with a public university and 20 with a private university. These 2 distinctions were used as a way to group the teachers into four groups as seen in the table below.

Table 1: Participants

	Private University	Public University
PhD holders	7	5
Masters Degree holders	13	6

First, the participants were asked to fill out a survey with a variety of questions in order to get quantitative and qualitative data. At the end of the survey there was an option for participants to leave their contact information if they were willing to participate in an interview, and a number of people chose to leave their contact information. However, due to conflicting schedules, ultimately four educators were interviewed for this study. One interview took place face-to-face, and three were conducted over the phone, as this was preferred for these participants. Through the interviews, the open-ended questions allowed the participants to speak more openly and comfortably about this topic, as well as to give more in depth answers (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). By combining the data from the survey with the interview discussions, this study intends to offer a comprehensive insight into the current climate of professional development among English instructors at universities in South Korea.

4.0 RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

A common way to develop professionally is through educational organizations. Among the 7 instructors with PhDs who work at private universities, 6 people (85.7%) said they are active members of these groups. Among 13 instructors with Master's degrees at private universities, 7 people (53.8%) are activities members. At public universities, less than half of the instructors are active members of professional organizations: 1 of 5 PhD holders (20%), and 2 of 6 Master's degree holders (33.3%). It is clear from this data that instructors at private universities tend to join and participate in professional organizations, particularly PhD holders, more than instructors at public institutions. The instructors who said they are active members belong to groups such as KOTESOL, NELTA, TESOL International, KATE, IATEFL, and the Applied Linguistics Association of Korea. They actively engage in these communities by attending events and conferences, publishing with these groups, running conferences, running smaller chapters of these groups, and running the webpage for a group.

When asked about engagement in professional development outside of educational organizations, participants responded using a Likert scale, where 1 is “No engagement at all. I do not do any professional development,” and 5 is “I regularly and consistently do some sort of professional development.” The average score for private university with a PhD is 2.7, private university with a Masters is 3.1, public university with a PhD is 2.6, and public university with a Masters is 2.8. There is slightly more involvement by teachers with Master's degrees than teachers with PhDs. Additionally, of the 6 respondents that answered with “I regularly and consistently do some sort of professional development,” 5 of these instructors worked at private universities. Some of the ways that teachers partake in PD outside of educational organizations are studying for a PhD, informal discussions with coworkers, researching, reading academic journals, taking micro-courses, and working an extra job as an IELTS examiner.

In terms of the requirements to do professional development, only 5 of the 31 instructors (16%) answered “yes” that it is required. Of the 20 private universities represented through this data, 4 of these institutions (20%) require professional development of some kind for this group of English instructors. At the 11 public universities represented in this survey, only 1 (9%) requires some sort of professional development. In other words, among the 5 “yes” respondents, 4 work at private universities and 1 works at a public university. Among these respondents, the private universities require professional development more than public universities.

Even though the requirements are not a factor, the instructors still felt that professional development is important to enhance their skills as English teachers. Using a Likert scale of 1 to 5, with 1 being “not important at all” and 5 being “very important” respondents overall gave an average score of 4, with the same average for private and public university workers. This shows that instructors themselves still place an importance on PD regardless of the external influence or lack thereof from their employer.

Participants were asked if professional development is rewarded or encouraged in any way at their workplaces, with the given examples of a salary raise or a travel stipend for conferences. Of all 31 responses, only 10 (32%) said yes. When the responses are divided into private and public universities, we can see a slight difference, as 2 public university teachers said yes (18%), and 8 private university teachers said yes (40%). This shows that while all the universities are clearly lacking in their rewards or encouragement of professional development, there is more of an emphasis on PD at private universities.

An important part of professional development is the pursuit of further education or certifications. To the survey question “Do you feel that your university adequately supports and encourages English teachers to pursue further education or certifications related to English language teaching?” 20% of private university educators (4 people) and 18% of public university educators (2 people) said yes. Overall, 71% of instructors said they do not feel that their university adequately supports and encourages the pursuit of further education or certifications. This shows that over half of these institutions do not support or encourage their English teaching staff to pursue further education.

It is important to note that the majority of institutions do not reward or encourage professional development. In fact, through interviews one instructor stated that there is “No support,

encouragement, or acknowledgement” of PD. Another interviewee simply stated that those working in administration “Don’t understand, don’t respect, don’t view us as real professors.” One teacher in particular said that their public university even seems to “actively discourage” professional development, as those with Master’s degrees are “not qualified because no PhD.”

With 71% of teachers stating that their workplace has no concern for or encouragement of PD, why are 52% of the respondents’ active members of educational organizations? Why do these respondents engage in PD multiple times a year on average when 68% of respondents said their school offers no rewards or encouragement for it? Through the survey and interviews, three themes emerged to explain why these educators are participating in professional development despite the lack of funds, support, or encouragement.

First, multiple interviewees, as well as survey takers, mentioned that staying competitive is a crucial factor. The South Korean population has been decreasing sharply over the past decade, which has led to university departments downsizing if not completely shutting their doors (Jung, 2024). One teacher mentioned that their department no longer hires new instructors when someone leaves, so they are worried about their future at the school. Teachers want to stay up to date on best practices in order to keep their jobs secure or to appear as a good candidate for any future job opportunities.

Second, many respondents said that they feel that PD contributes to the field of English education, and they want to be a part of that. Similar to this sentiment, someone stated that PD helps them to “think critically” about their role as an educator. One interviewee said that professional development makes them feel good, as they find it “more energizing than depleting.”

Lastly, conferences, workshops, and events offer opportunities to network with others, and a number of respondents said that this draws them to these activities. The social aspect of these types of professional development was mentioned as an important and joyful part of attending and participating.

5.0 DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

There are a number of limitations to this study that must be noted. In terms of the scope of this study, the number of educators that filled out the survey and participated in the interviews is quite small, and it would be quite challenging to measure what percent of instructors participated in this research. This is due to the difficulty in estimating the number of university English instructors in South Korea, as instructors may have a number of different visas, such as a teaching visa, marriage visa, permanent resident visa, etc. Additionally, professors are often registered under different departments in order to fill quotas. However, as this research surveyed teachers from 31 universities, it is possible to roughly calculate the percent of universities that are represented in this data. According to the Ministry of Education, “There are about 200 four-year comprehensive universities in Korea that offer bachelor’s degree programs” (Higher Education, n.d.). Therefore, only about 16% of universities are represented in this research. In order to get a more well-rounded understanding of PD for English instructors at universities, it would be beneficial to survey a larger number of instructors.

Even though the scope of this research is small, there is a notable difference in the requirement of professional development depending on the type of university. As described previously, 5 instructors reported that professional development is required at their workplace, and 4 of these 5 works at private universities. In other words, among all the survey takers, 20% of the private university workers stated that PD is required at their school as compared to 9% of public university workers. It is important to keep in mind that the number of total survey takers is quite small. With this in mind, the results do align with what one may assume when considering funding for public and private institutions. As the population of Korea decreases, university departments are closing, not hiring new teachers when someone leaves, or the entire university shuts down. National universities, which are publicly funded, are not as affected as private universities which rely on different sources of income. Therefore, by requiring some sort of PD such as publishing, presenting at conferences, etc. this helps to boost the university's ranking. In turn, this helps to keep the university competitive and aids in their ability to draw in more students.

A large missing piece of this puzzle is why and how these instructors work at these specific institutions. Do private universities discuss PD when interviewing applicants, as opposed to public universities? The workplace atmosphere may also foster or discourage PD, as noted in one interview. These are complex questions that require more in-depth research.

Lastly, within the scope of this study, action research came up a few times during interviews and discussions with colleagues about this topic. Further research on the experiences or lack thereof with action research may illuminate further how university instructors engage with professional development across South Korea.

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