Permanent Learning: Continuing Your Teacher Education

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Abstract: This article outlines goals for career growth teaching and the experiential learning cycle, the importance of feedback, types of feedback, self-assessment of a lesson, research for English language teachers, ideas for moving forward, professional associations and organizations, professional journals and teacher’s portfolios.

Keywords: Teaching and the experiential learning cycle; self-assessment; action research; teachers’ portfolios; continuing professional development.

Introduction. Ambitions for career growth. The demand for English teachers in Uzbekistan, as well as around the world, is very high. English continues to be the preferred language in many areas of life. More and more business people are finding English necessary to secure a job or promotion. Thousands of people travel to English speaking countries to study and work. More and more people travel abroad to attend seminars and workshops or see relatives, friends, colleagues and they need to speak English to explain their reason for visiting a country to a customs officer, or while checking in, etc. And, of course, the majority of pages on the Internet are in English. Thus, for the foreseeable future at least, teachers of English will never be short of a job. Besides, many experienced and successful teachers say that it is a very exciting and rewarding profession. But at the same time, they stress that in order to be a good and successful teacher one should grow professionally and always try to do a better and better job of teaching. As D. Brown puts it, “one of the most invigorating things about teaching is that you never stop learning”.

Literature review. D. Brown suggests eight different goals that can provide continuing career growth for many teachers of English:

- Knowledge of the theoretical foundations of language learning and language teaching.
- The analytical skills necessary for assessing different teaching contexts and classroom conditions.
- The confidence and skill to alter your teaching techniques as needed.
- Practical experience with different teaching techniques.
- Informed knowledge of yourself and your students.
- Interpersonal communication skills.
- Attitudes of flexibility and openness to change. [1, p.426]

Teaching and the experiential learning cycle. We all know that teaching and learning need to be distinguished. The process of learning often involves five steps:

1 - doing something, 2 – recalling what happened, 3 – reflecting on that, 4 – drawing conclusions, 5 – using those conclusions to inform and prepare for future practical experience. You can see these five steps in the experiential learning cycle below. [2, p. 3]

The process of teaching involves the following: Information, explanation, guidance, counseling,
demonstration, instruction, giving examples, correction, counseling, encouragement, evaluating, reviewing, modeling, summarizing, questioning, giving feedback, etc.

All of the above may come in at any of the five steps of the cycle. You can see that in the figure “Teaching and the experiential learning cycle”.

**Figure 1 Teaching and experiential learning cycle.**

These two cycles suggest a number of conclusions for teachers of English. Some of them are the following:

- Teachers should worry less about teaching techniques and should try to make the enabling of teaching as their main concern. In other words, they should pay more attention to the inner circle of the teaching and the experiential learning cycle.

- Teachers need to ensure that they allow their students practical experience in doing things. In other words, students should use language rather than simply listen to talks/lectures about language.

- Teachers cannot learn for their students. The more a teacher does herself/himself, the less space there will be for the students to do things.

- Teachers should help students become more aware about how they are learning.

- It is normal for students to make mistakes, to try new things out and get things wrong and learn from that. The same is true for the teacher, especially for the one whose motto is “There are no failures, only outcomes”.

**Discussion.** The Importance of Feedback. Types of feedback. Teachers can teach and teach. Or they can teach and learn teaching. Those who learn how to teach will never say, “I know it all. I can relax for the rest of my career.” Learning teaching is a desire to move forward, to keep learning from what happens. It involves feedback from students and colleagues as well as reflection on what happened, together with an excitement about trying a slightly different option next time. Learning teaching is a belief that creativity, understanding, experience and character continue growing throughout one’s life.

Feedback from students. Avoiding feedback or ignoring it may lead to serious problems. If a teacher’s intention is only to hear nice things, then most probably the teacher will get them. In order to know what students really think, a teacher should ask open questions that enable students to say what they want to say. The feedback from students may be difficult for the teacher for the first time, but as Jim Scrivener says, “The end result of increased honesty, openness and mutual respect will almost certainly have a great long-term benefit, the more so if you implement changes in yourself, the class or the course that responses to the feedback”

Feedback from other teachers. Ask your colleagues to come and observe some of your lessons, and do an exchange observation with them on a regular basis. The purpose of these observations
will be not to judge each other but to learn from each other. Sharing ideas and skills with your colleagues will result in the growth of trust and respect. If your colleague is busy and cannot observe your lesson, you can ask him/her just to listen to your thoughts about the lesson. Your colleague should not offer any suggestions or advice or help or opinions. He or she will simply listen and support you. Though this kind of helping is very simple to describe, it is very powerful in action. Jim Scrivener stresses that “it can be surprisingly beneficial to talk through one’s own experience with another person who is really listening” [3, p.196]

Self-feedback. Teachers often see a lesson they have just taught either as a huge success or a complete failure. In order to take an objective, more balanced view of what happened, a teacher should first recall what happened, then reflect on that and look for what was successful and what can be improved. Whatever the lesson was like, there must have been good points in it and things that could be worked on. This is true for very experienced teachers as well as for beginners. The first important steps towards becoming a better teacher involve an increased awareness about what we do now and openness to the possibility of change.

Self-Assessment of a Lesson. In order to assess your own lesson, you may choose a question from part A below, one question from part B, and one from part C. Write down your answers. You may discuss your answers with your colleague who will be just listening. Part A focuses on recalling what happened in the lesson. B focuses on reflecting on the lesson, and C focuses on making conclusions from experience and finding ways to move forward in your future teaching.

In recent years there has been an increase in the frequency with which studies of classroom research, teacher research, and action research have been published. These terms have been often confused. So, what do the terms mean? Of these three concepts, the one with the longest tradition in language teaching is classroom research. It is research where the data are collected within the confines of a physical classroom. Teacher research is defined by who conducts it. Teacher research usually takes place in classrooms, and it typically focuses on some elements of classroom interaction, but it doesn’t necessarily have to. For example, a teacher could study the written interaction between teacher’s and his / her students through the student’s dialogue journals and his/her responses to them. Finally, the term action research is an approach to collecting and interpreting data that involves a clear, repeated cycle of procedures. The researcher begins by planning an action to address a problem, issue, or question. This action (sometimes called small-scale intervention) is then carried out. (This is the source of the label action research.) The next step is the systematic observation of the outcomes of the action. The observation is done through a variety of procedures for collecting data. After observing the apparent results of the action, the researcher reflects on the outcome and plans a subsequent action, after which the cycle begins again.

Action research is carried out not so much to fulfill a thesis requirement or to publish a journal article as to improve your own understanding of the teaching-learning process in the classroom. As D. Brown says, “The payoff for treating your teaching-learning questions seriously is, ultimately, becoming a better teacher” and he stresses that the teacher might also find that what she has learned is worth sharing with other teachers, either through informal chats or through a conference presentation. [4, p.437]

What topics or issues can teachers investigate doing action research? Teachers may have quite a few ideas about topics that they could investigate. But in order to be able to draw conclusions, your ideas have to be converted into questions that you can answer. The questions do not have to be long, just specific enough that you can look back after your investigation and really come up with an answer. Below are examples of the questions:

- What is the cause for my students’ shyness to use English in the classroom?
- What is the effect of error treatment on the performance of students in the classroom?
- Are students more effective speakers of English when techniques such as holding the floor, bringing in another speaker, etc are taught?
Which tasks stimulate more interaction?

Is there a conflict between the classroom activities I like / prefer and those my students like / prefer?

Do my best students share certain strategy preferences that distinguish them from less efficient students?

Are weak students more reluctant to speak English when they work in small groups with strong students?

Why should teachers get involved in action research?

There are good reasons for teachers to conduct research. The processes involved in data collection and analysis can help them discover patterns (both positive and negative) in their interactions with students. They can discover interesting new questions and answers, both of which can energize their teaching. By reading or hearing accounts of other people’s research, they can get new ideas for becoming better connected with the profession at large. And by sharing the results of their own research in teachers’ rooms, at conferences, in publications, they can get feedback from other teachers and learn from their experiences.

Ideas for moving forward. 1. Set short-term and long-term goals. Some of them might be the following: Since reading is the most widely used means of keeping abreast of professional matters, read professional magazines and teacher resource books on a regular basis.

- Subscribe to a professional magazine.
- Use the Internet for papers on issues not covered in ELT literature.
- Surf the Internet for new ideas to inform your teaching.
- Visit websites about TEFL and look for what is new about teaching English from all around the world.
- Read new ideas in magazines and try them out in your classroom.
- Conduct a survey of your students.
- Search for opportunities to apply for a grant/scholarship.
- Use five-minute papers as a tool for reflecting teaching.
- Start writing retrospective field notes.

2. Set priorities. It is important that you have a sense of what is most important, what is less important, and everything in between, in your professional goals and tasks. If you don’t, you can end up spending too much time on low-priority tasks. Priority setting requires a sense of your whole professional and personal life.

3. Take risks. The key to risk-taking is not simply in taking the risks. It is learning from your failures. When you use a new activity in the classroom, try a new approach to a difficult student, or make a frank comment to a school headmaster, you must be ready to accept possible failure in your attempt. Then you reflect on the failure and try to turn it into an experience that will teach you how to calculate the next risk.

Results. Professional associations and organizations. Professional associations and organizations offer an excellent means of keeping in touch with others in the same field. They provide opportunities to learn what others in similar contexts are thinking and doing and to share insights and ideas from your own experience. Through a professional association, you can also become more actively involved in improving the profession: in helping to set standards for instruction, in developing criteria for evaluating programs, or in recognizing exemplary research or practice. Most organizations also have a number of special interest groups (SIG) which communicate regularly through publications, email, or conferences about specific aspects of the profession –
for example, the use of computers or video in teaching, the teaching of specific skills or specific level, etc. [5, 213 p.]

Teachers’ Portfolios. Portfolios may be defined as purposeful compilations of and reflections on an individual’s work, effort, and progress over time. Portfolios are used in various professions for many reasons and take different forms based on their purpose and audience. Teaching portfolios have been increasing in popularity in Europe and the USA since the early 1990s. One reason is that various professional organizations concerned with teacher quality have encouraged teachers to create their own portfolios. These organizations view portfolios as an authentic means for demonstrating the many facets of a teacher’s professionalism. Another reason for the popularity is that teacher benefit personally and professionally from the portfolio creation process. There are two basic types of portfolios: working portfolios and presentation portfolios. Both types have special features and characteristics.

A teaching portfolio is a special type of presentation portfolio that demonstrates the professional competence of anyone who engages in the act of teaching at any academic level. What goes in a teaching portfolio? Here is a suggested list of contents for a teaching portfolio.

1) Program Design.
   ✓ Goals and objectives of the courses you teach.
   ✓ Course syllabus.
   ✓ Statement about your role as a teacher.
   ✓ Examples of how you make curriculum more challenging for your students.

2) Methodology.
   ✓ Lesson plans.
   ✓ Enjoyable and motivating activities, exercises & tasks you have designed.
   ✓ (Demonstration) lesson plans.
   ✓ Instructional materials you have created.

3) Evidence of Your Growth and Development.
   ✓ Recent changes you have incorporated into teaching.
   ✓ Conferences, seminars, and workshops you have attended.
   ✓ Organizations you belong to (such as TESOL, IATEFL).
   ✓ Projects you have created/written.
   ✓ Audio & video tapes of selected lesson.

Merely having a portfolio is no longer good enough. When teachers compete for good and prestigious jobs, every advantage counts. Today headmasters are looking for technologically competent teachers. And when teachers create digital portfolios, the fact that their names appear in multimedia format communicates their willingness to innovate, their interest in developing new skills, and their effort to be professional. [6, 138 p.]

Digital teaching portfolios are teaching portfolios that integrate technology with the processes of creating a portfolio and the display of the product resulting from this process.

Creating a portfolio using digital technologies has a number of advantages. Materials in digital teaching portfolio can be more accessible than those in traditional portfolios because they can be viewed by multiple users simultaneously, disseminated easily and reproduced quickly. Teachers who use digital tools to create their portfolios often find multimedia environments provide them with a great deal of creative freedom. Also, they say that the process helps them build self-confidence and technical skills.
Conclusion. In summary, after completing this article, you will be able to identify a number of strategies and resources for continuing professional development, explain why teaching is a continual growth experience, describe many ways in which being an EFL teacher is a growth experience, explain the importance of feedback, articulate some of your ideas for moving forward and explain what topics or issues teachers can investigate doing action research.

References: