



Lived Experiences of EFL Teacher Educators on Collegial Professional Learning

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Abstract

The main purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore the experience of experienced expert English as Foreign Language (EFL) teacher educators on collegial professional learning. To collect data, six experienced expert English as Foreign Language (EFL) teacher educators who have Master of Arts degree in Teaching English as a Foreign Language (MA in TEFL) and 25-36 years of experience in teaching English as a foreign language were selected as a sample of the study using a purposive sampling technique. To collect data from these respondents, in-depth interviews and narrative frames were used. The data obtained from these instruments were analyzed qualitatively using the thematic analysis technique. The findings revealed that EFL teacher educators have positive perspectives and experience in collegial learning. Because of their engagement in collegial learning, the participants feel that they have developed professional learning characteristics and improved their skills and teaching methods of the English language. It was also found that the participants most commonly employed peer observation and collaborative discussion as means of their collegial professional learning strategies. Their experiences of engaging in these professional strategies, on the other hand, make them gain insights that have a great contribution to their professional learning. These insights include exposure to different sources of professional learning and improving pedagogical content knowledge of the English language. Thus, the findings of this study imply that EFL teacher educators should be involved in collegial professional learning to develop their profession and enhance student learning.

Keywords

Collegial Learning, Peer Observation, Collaboration, Professional Learning

1. Introduction

English language education has been given great attention in different parts of the world as it plays a great role in the education, political, economic, social, and technological aspects of the countries (Dorothy and Mahalakshmi, 2011; Pinion and Hydon, 2010; Richards and Rodgers, 2001). Taking these roles of the English language into account, researchers around the globe have made much effort to make the teaching and learning of English more effective and produce learners who have good command of English (Larsen-Freeman and Anderson, 2011). One of the efforts they have made is investigating productive strategies for EFL teacher professional learning that improve EFL teachers' language skills, methods of teaching and student learning (Hayes and Chang, 2012; Johnson and Johnson, 1999; Larsen-Freeman and Anderson, 2011; Richards and Farrell, 2005).

Nowadays, thus, new strategies and practical ways of EFL professional learning strategies that go along with EFL (English as a Foreign Language) teachers' needs have been introduced. One of these teacher-professional learning strategies is collegial learning (Darling-Hammond, 2017; Hargreaves and Fullan, 2012; Johnson, 2009; Richards and

Lockhart, 1994). It is a professional learning strategy that is held on by creating strong relationships and collaboration among EFL teachers (Lieberman and Miller, 1984). This professional learning strategy emerged on the assumption that learning is naturally a social act and knowledge can be created among the learning members' interaction, sharing of experiences and taking of different roles. When EFL teachers, for example, undertake interclass visitations and observation or when they discuss classroom-related issues together, it is not only their collaboration or teamwork that makes teachers effective in their professional learning, but also it is their relationship or collegiality that affects their professional development. Therefore, collegial professional learning can be used as an umbrella for a variety of professional learning activities when there is collegiality among EFL teachers (Richards and Farrell, 2005). Supporting this idea, (Head and Taylor(1997) state that English language teachers can share their successes, failures, achievements and experiences if they collegiate and collaborate, so collegiality is a basis for collegial learning as it increases talking, listening and interaction among English language teachers and increases strong interpersonal relationships based upon sustained, regular, informal and formal face to face contact.

As in other countries, the English language has a great role in the social, political, economic and educational aspects of the country [Bacharoe, 2014, 15; Dawit, 2013; Johnson, 2017). However, teaching English has become a common problem in Ethiopia as English is taught as a foreign language, and most of the students do not have outside exposure to practice the English language (Jha, 2013; Meseret, 2012). Thus, the classroom is considered the only place most students practice the target language, and EFL teachers are considered the single source of linguistic input for most of the EFL learners. Consequently, the country has made much effort to improve the teaching and learning of English as a foreign language by developing EFL teachers' profession using collegial professional learning. Although the country introduced a collegial professional learning strategy as a means of EFL teachers' professional development, and it encourages them to use it in their day-to-day professional learning activities, as far as the researchers' knowledge is concerned, no research has been conducted on how EFL teacher educators experienced collegial professional learning in Ethiopian EFL contexts. Thus, we were initiated to explore the experience of EFL teacher educators in collegial EFL professional learning, and this study answers the following research questions.

1. How do EFL teacher educators perceive their experiences of collegial professional learning?
2. What collegial professional learning strategies do EFL teacher educators experience to develop their profession?
3. What insights do EFL teacher educators gain in engaging in different types of collegial professional learning strategies?

2. Materials and Methods

The research design for this study was a transcendental phenomenological research design. This design was selected as it is used to describe EFL teacher educators' daily experiences of using collegial learning as their professional learning strategy. To collect data for the study, six experienced expert EFL teacher educators from Debre Markos College of Teacher Education were used as samples of the study. These participants were anonymously assigned during data analysis: Participant 1 = Miru, Participant 2 = Zemen, Participant 3 = Mesifin, Participant 4 = Muhabaw = Participant 5 = Meketaw and Participant 6 = Belay. To collect data from these participants, an in-depth interview was used as the main data collection instrument for two main reasons: it encourages the participants to give a full description of their experience with the phenomenon being investigated and it is the main data collection instrument in the phenomenological study. The narrative frames, a guideline of questions that contain different types of items like open-ended questions, short answers and blank spaces, were used to support the data obtained from in-depth interviews.

To analyze the data obtained from each instrument, the researchers adapted Moustakas's (1994) guideline of phenomenological data analysis techniques. Based on these guidelines, thus, the researchers used the following steps to analyze the data:

- (1) Listening and understanding in detail the recorded in-depth interview data.
- (2) Transcribing the interview data.
- (3) Reading and re-reading the transcribed data and data obtained from narrative frames.
- (4) Listing each non-repetitive, non-overlapping statement.
- (5) Recording all relevant statements in a separate word file.
- (6) Coding the data using open, axial and selective coding.
- (7) Based on these coding strategies, relating clustering and thematizing the data.
- (8) Synthesizing the invariant meaning units and themes into a description of the textures of the experience, Including verbatim examples, and
- (9) Constructing a description of the meanings and essences of the experience.

As qualitative researchers, we also kept the credibility and trustworthiness of the research using member checking, triangulation, rich description, peer checking, peer-reviewing, bracketing and establishing trustworthy relationships with participants of the study.

3. Results and Discussion

By analyzing the data obtained from in-depth interviews and narrative frames, five major themes were identified. These themes include positive perspectives and experiences on collegial professional learning, learning from peer observation,

learning from collaborative discussion, exposure to different types of professional learning resources and developing pedagogical content knowledge of the English language. These themes were presented under each research question to ensure the emerging themes could answer each research question.

3.1 Research Question One

Research question one was designed to obtain data about EFL teacher educators' perceived experiences on collegial professional learning. As the data obtained from in-depth interviews and narrative frames indicated, all of the participants experienced positive perspectives and experiences in collegial professional learning. The participants feel that collegial learning has a great role in developing their profession and their professional learning characteristics. Concerning improving their profession, the participants feel that collegial learning has a significant role in creating supportive relationships. For example, Miru, states, "Collegial learning plays a great role in making a strong relationship among us, doing different tasks collaboratively and developing our profession". Belay also states, "Because of our collegiality, we could exchange knowledge, experiences and expertise so that we develop our profession." Similarly, Johnson (2009) and Richards and Farrell (2005) found that through colleague discussion, EFL teachers share instructional strategies, reflect on their practices, gain new perspectives and improve their teaching techniques and language skills.

The participants also perceived that they had developed different types of professional learning characteristics. They feel that they become responsible, creative, innovative and autonomous in their professional learning when they engage in collegial learning. Concerning their responsibility, Mesifin adds, "Through collegial learning, we can collectively identify areas for our weaknesses, strengths and improvements." Meketaw also adds that "because of collegial learning, I feel that I can take the responsibility of engaging in different types of collaborative professional learning strategies, for example, peer observation and collegial discussion." As the participants' descriptions and quotations of their experience indicated, the participants were empowered to take control of their learning journey when they engaged in collegial learning. Similarly, Johnson (2009) found that collegiality plays a crucial role in developing EFL teachers' taking responsibility for developing their profession.

The other characteristic the participants have developed in engaging in collegial learning is autonomy. The participants feel that they are empowered to take control of their learning journey when they engage in collegial learning. For example, Miru, states, "Collegial learning empowers me to take ownership of my professional learning. Whenever I discuss with my colleagues, I feel autonomous and take the power to learn more about my teaching." From the respondents' experiences of collegiality and sense of ownership in developing their profession, one can infer that the participants positively perceived the roles of collegiality and collaborative learning in enhancing their autonomy of professional learning.

The participants also feel that collegial learning plays a pivotal role in enhancing their creativity and innovation. When they work together and share their experiences of EFL teaching and learning, they feel that they promote a culture of creativity and innovation. The participants also state that collegial learning encourages them to experiment with new teaching methods and strategies, learn from each other's experiences and explore innovative approaches to language instruction. For example, Miru states, "When I discuss [about] EFL teaching with my colleagues, I feel that I develop my creativity, I become creative in using different methods relevant to students' needs and contents of the lesson." Zemen also adds collegial learning makes him creative and innovative. He states it like this. "When I discuss with my colleagues, I feel I am creative and innovative because I think critically and generate novel ideas when I discuss with my colleagues." This implies that collegial learning plays a pivotal role in enhancing EFL teacher educators' creativity and innovation. Similarly, Johnson and Christensen (2010) found that collegiality among teachers has a great role in making EFL teachers work together, share ideas, engage in professional discussions and enhance the culture of creativity and innovation in the classroom.

3.2 Research Question Two

Research question two was designed to investigate the experiences of EFL teacher educators in engaging in different types of collegial professional learning strategies. Two main themes emerged to answer this research question. These include peer observation and collaborative discussion. As the shared testimonies of the participants indicated, peer observation can be considered a useful tool for EFL teacher educators' professional development. They experienced learning from it in three ways: observing their friends' classroom teaching practices, getting feedback from observers' and discussing recordings of classroom observations. For example, Mesifin's shared testimonies indicated that he differentiates the different teaching methods, is aware of how to manage EFL classrooms and develops his macro and micro skills in the English language. In light of this, he states:

... I learn a lot from my colleagues. In my college, I observe my friends, and they also observe me. Thus, I learned different things like teaching methods, ways of managing the classroom [and] the way they use different teaching methods in different [contents]. We learn each other different skills and knowledge about English language teaching [and] learning.

Belay is also inspired by the professional development he obtained from peer observation. It provides him with the insights needed to make improvements to his instruction. From the participants' responses, it is inferred that peer observation is a plausible way of professional learning by collectively questioning ineffective teaching routines,

examining new conceptions of teaching and learning, finding generative means of teaching the English language and engaging actively in supporting their professional growth. Similarly, different Authors such as Al-Amri and Al-Omari (2019), Brown (2020), Chen and Yang (2020), Garcia (2021), Johnson (2019) and Smith (2018) found that peer observation can play a significant role in improving EFL teachers' English language skills and teaching strategies.

The participants also feel that professional learning is plausible when they collectively question ineffective teaching routines, examine new conceptions of teaching and learning and support each other. As a result, they experienced discussing and sharing ideas with colleagues and posing questions about their professional development. For example, Zemen shows his experience of professional learning from colleague discussions as follows.

The teaching profession by itself needs collaboration. Being alone or being an individual, being independent, it is impossible to be successful. Therefore, the profession itself makes us involved in discussion and sharing of experiences with colleagues. We teach each other, we discuss each other and one another. It is through discussion that we can learn and have opportunities for good teaching. Therefore, we always interact with together. I interact with my friends [and] with my colleagues so that we can learn much.

In the narrative frames, Meketaw describes that he learns a lot from colleague discussions, particularly when he conducts supervisions, engages in training programmes and does action research. He considers all these as his most common professional learning strategies. Hence, the findings of the study imply that collaboration and discussion have become a regular practice of professional learning among EFL teacher educators. They make professional relations with colleagues for the benefit of their EFL professional development and the improvement of their daily classroom hazards. Besides, it seems that the participants can function as members of a community of practitioners who share knowledge and commitments to develop their profession and create systems that support student learning. Similarly, (Hadijah and Kurniawan (2020) found that EFL teachers have positive perspectives on collaborative discussion, and they use it as a means of their professional learning. Johnson (2017) also adds that a collaborative approach to professional development encourages teachers to challenge their existing knowledge and explore new perspectives, ultimately enhancing their content knowledge.

3.3 Research Question Three

The third research question of the study focused on the insights EFL teacher educators gained from collegial professional learning. Thus, it was found that the participants gained two insights: exposure of EFL teacher educators to different professional learning sources and gaining pedagogical content knowledge. Concerning the first insight, the participants describe that they identify colleagues, classroom observations, students, English language teaching journals and formal/informal discussions as the major sources of their professional learning. Engaging in these sources, on the other hand, promotes their pedagogical content knowledge. Regarding this, Miru, states, "My experience of engaging in collegial learning makes me identify different sources of professional learning." Mesifin also adds that "getting different sources of professional learning from my colleagues help[helps] me develop our [my] use of different sources of professional learning, so now I can use different sources such as my students, experienced EFL teachers, the internet, the classroom and others." Zemen describes the insights he gained from collegial learning by mentioning the professional learning sources. He states, "When I engage in collegial learning, I find many sources of professional learning like, English Language Teaching (ELT) journals, EFL classroom contexts [and] classroom events/problems. If I do not interact with my colleagues, I consider reading ELT materials as the only source of my professional learning."

The participants also describe that they gain a blending of EFL content and pedagogical knowledge when they engage in collegial learning. This in turn helps them understand how topics, problems or issues are organized and presented to the diverse interests and abilities of learners. For example, Miru mentioned the most common pedagogical content knowledge he gained from collegial learning. He states it like this. "I have got different insights from my colleagues. I learned how to manage my classroom [and] how to make my lesson interesting. When we conduct research collaboratively, I learn how to organize ideas in writing." Mesifin also states, "I got several insights from my discussion with my colleagues: I got how to use a variety of teaching methods. Just I develop the learning of language skills, knowledge, ability and desire to learn." From this data, it is possible to infer that the participants gained different insights that enhanced their quality of teaching and student learning. This means that the participants gained insights that enabled them to learn at different times, in different ways, for different purposes and employ it in different EFL classroom contexts. Similarly, Farrell (2015) found that collegial learning promotes EFL teachers' teaching methods and identifies areas for improvement.

4. Conclusion

This study was conducted to explore EFL teacher educators' lived experiences of collegial learning. Based on the findings of the study, the following conclusions were made. Concerning EFL teacher educators perceiving experience of collegial learning, it was concluded that EFL teacher educators have positive perspectives and experiences on collegial learning. They feel that their professional learning becomes plausible when they collectively question ineffective teaching routines and examine new conceptions of teaching and learning of English language. They also believe that they develop different types of professional learning characteristics such as taking responsibility and increasing their autonomy, creativity and

innovation in their professional learning. They also improve their teaching methods and skills in the English language. It was also concluded that EFL teacher educators experienced two types of collegial learning strategies: peer observation and collaborative discussion. Their engagement in these types of professional learning strategies, on the other hand, makes them gain insights such as exposure to different types of professional learning strategies and gaining of a variety of pedagogical content of English Language. Therefore, the findings of this study imply that creating strong relationships among EFL teacher educators and engaging in different forms of collegial professional learning activities provides them with a rich source of knowledge, skills and teaching methods of the English language and develops positive and fulfilling experiences of EFL teacher educators towards their professional learning. Therefore, EFL teacher educators should engage in collegial professional learning to improve their teaching practices and provide better learning experiences for their students.

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The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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