THE CONTRIBUTION OF CONSTRUCTIVISM INTO THE PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHERS'

Fatma YUVAYAPAN
Kahramanmaraş Sütçü İmam University
Department of Foreign Languages

ÖZET

Son yıllarda, yapısalcı kuram eğitim ve öğretim sürecinde oldukça etkili olmuştur. Yapısalcı öğretmen gelişimi yansıtıcı düşünme ve işbirliği gibi 2 önemli kavramı vurgulamaktadır. Yansıtıcı düşünme bir öğretmenin kendi öğretiminin farkında olması olarak tanımlanabilir. Bu nedenle, temelinde yapısalcı kuram olan yansıtıcı öğretim, meslektaşlarının yardımıyla öğretmenlerin kendi öğretimlerini içsel olarak analiz etmelerine olanak sağlamaktadır. Bu bağlamda, kaynağını yansıtıcı öğretimden alan ve bir mesleki gelişim topluluğu olan Eleştirel Arkadaş Grubu etkili bir öğretmen gelişimi yöntemi olarak düşünülebilir. Bir Eleştirel Arkadaş Grubu programında öğretmenler gönüllü bir şekilde buluşarak öğrencilerinin çalışmalarını ya da kendi öğretimleri ile ilgili sorunlarını dayanışma içinde tartışırlar. Bu çalışmada etkili bir öğretmen gelişimi programının öğretmenlerin destekleyici bir mesleki ortamda meslektaşlarıyla dayanışma içinde bulunarak kendi öğretimlerine yansıtıcı bir şekilde yaklaşmalarına yardımcı olması gerektiği önerilmektedir. Bu makale, 8 hafta süren bir Eleştirel Arkadaş Grubu programından yola çıkarak, gelecek araştırmalar için önerilerde bulunmaktadır. Katılımcılar programa gönüllü olarak katılan ve özel bir okulda çalışan 4 İngilizce öğretmeninden oluşmaktadır. Veriler günlük tutma, araştırmacının saha notları, anketler ve yarı yapılandırılmış görüşmelerle toplanmıştır. Çalışmanın sonuçları öğretmenlerin kendi öğretimlerine yansıtıcı bir şekilde yaklaşmalarında samimi ve destekleyici bir ortamda meslektaş dayanışması içinde çalışmanın pozitif bir etkisi olduğunu ileri sürmektedir. Sonuç olarak, öğretmenler kendi öğretimlerini meslektaşlarının yardımıyla yapısalcı bir çerçevede daha etkin bir hale dönüştürebilirler.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Yapısalcı kuram, öğretmen gelişimi, yansıtıcı öğretim, eleştirel arkadaş grubu.

ABSTRACT

In recent years, constructivism has offered considerable suggestions in teaching and learning process. Constructivist teacher education emphasizes two major concepts: reflection and collaboration. Reflection can be defined as being aware of one's own teaching. Hence, reflective teaching which is based on constructivism has received considerable attention since it paves the way for teachers to internally analyze their teaching with the help of their colleagues. In this sense, having its roots from reflective teaching, Critical Friends Group which is a professional learning community may be applauded as an effective teacher development activity. In a Critical Friends Group program, teachers meet voluntarily to discuss their students' work or their dilemmas about their teaching in a supportive environment. In this study, it is suggested that an effective teacher development program must assist teachers to be reflective on their teaching through working collaboratively in a supportive professional community. This article seeks to address the implications of a Critical Friends Group program which lasted 8 weeks for further researchers. The participants were 4 voluntary English Language teachers working in a private school. The data was collected using teachers' diary, the researchers' field notes, questionnaire and interviews. The findings supported the idea that working in collaboration in a friendly and supportive professional community has a positive impact on teachers to be reflective on their teaching. As a result, they facilitate their teaching practices by the help of their colleagues in a constructivist framework.

Key Words: Constructivism, teacher development, reflective teaching, critical friends group.

1. Introduction

Central to the entire discipline of teaching and learning process is the philosophy of constructivism. More specially, constructivism has constituted a basis for both learning process and professional development. As Wadhwa (2008) states the idea behind constructivism " rests on the notion of continuous building and amending previous structures or schemata, as new experience, actions and knowledge are assimilated and accommodated. Richardson (1997) defines it as "learning and meaning-making theory" (p. 3). It encourages learners to create their knowledge based on what they already know. Brooks and Brooks (1993) have subscribed to the belief that at the heart of human nature is "constructing our understandings of the world which we live in" (p. 3). Through establishing relationships between our new experiences and the previous ones, we explore our world. When a contradiction between our previous knowledge and new perception or data exists, we either develop a new understanding of that phenomenon or ignore the newly learned information. In each case, we actively construct our own knowledge.

It is becoming increasingly difficult to ignore the effects of constructivism in teacher development. The constructivist view of teacher development suggests that each teaching situation is unique, so teachers may need to be aware of their beliefs and views about education and their implications to their teaching (Williams & Burdens, 1997). Additionally, Cannela and Reiff (1994) allege that "to most adequately address the needs of other learners, a teacher must first understand him/ herself as a learner. How does it feel to be confused? What happens when a peer proposes an idea that contradicts my own thoughts? How am I similar and different from other individuals in my own cultural community? This very personal understanding of learning creates the openness and flexibility for comprehending the learning of others" (p. 27).

Reflective teaching which is based on constructivism is an increasingly important notion in teacher development. Richards (2011) states

"Reflection refers to an activity or process in which an experience is recalled, considered, and evaluated, usually in relation to a broader purpose. It is a response to past experience and involves conscious recall and examination of the experience as a basis for evaluation and decision-making and as a source for planning and action" (p. 33).

Richards and Lockhart (1996) define being reflective as "collecting data about teaching, examining attitudes, beliefs, assumptions and teaching practices and using the information obtained" (p. 1). They also emphasize that anything which happens in the class can be used as a tool by teachers to make sense of their teaching more deeply, which may be sometimes impossible to achieve owing to some disruptors taken place in the class. Reflection lets teachers a space to become more aware of themselves, which apparently influences their teaching experiences (Lee, 2007). Jasper (2003) states "reflective practice means that we learn by thinking about things that have happened to us and seeing them in a different way, which enables us to take some kind of action" (p. 2).

Bolton (2010) claims that reflective practice enables to explore;

- What you know but do not know you know
- What you do not know but want to know
- What you think, believe, value, understand about you role and boundaries
- How your actions match up with what you believe
- How to value and take into account personal feelings" (p. 4).

As it seems clear, reflective practice is a crucial component of teacher development. Therefore, it shouldn't be limited to technical level such as the evaluation of teaching and learning strategies and classroom resources. Instead, reflective practice should be used as a means of finding out the underlying assumptions in our teaching process to develop a personal understanding of learning and teaching (Harrison, 2008).

Recently, group facilitation is involved in teacher development methods as teachers' roles require mutual collaboration and as professional development of teachers enhances student outcomes. However, when teachers are lack of skills to improve professional conversations, attempts for professional development through collaboration fail (Cohen, 2008). Ellen (2007) outlines the factors facilitating group development. First of all, group members need to establish some criteria to evaluate the functioning of relationships and task achievement in the group dynamics. Secondly, the most important areas that are considered to be changed and the factors limiting these changes must be identified. Finally, groups must make a personal commitment to achieve the goals and plans for change no matter there exists a facilitator outside the group or not. Pettis (2002) highlights that every opportunity for professional development needs to stimulate a personal commitment for teachers.

A number of approaches have been advocated to enhance group facilitation one of which is Critical Friends Group (CFG). CFG is a professional community aiming to promote student learning through collaboration. It includes 4-10 members meeting approximately one hour per week (Andreu et al., 2003, cited in Vo & Nguyen, 2010). "Protocols are a structured process or a set of guidelines to promote meaningful and efficient communication, problem solving and learning. They give time for active listening and reflection so all voices in the group are heard and honored" (National School Reform Faculty).

Members focus on factors affecting students' achievement such as examining curriculum, and students' work (School Reform Initiative, 2012). Zepeda (2008) emphasizes that CFG is a satisfying professional development method since,

- It is continual
- It is focused on teachers' own teaching and their own students' learning
- It takes place in a small group of supportive and trusted colleagues within their own school (p. 226).

2. Findings of The Study

An-eight-week CFG program was conducted in November, 2012 with 4 participants who were teaching English in a private school of Kahramanmaraş. During 8 weeks, the participants and the researcher hold weekly meetings which include a variety protocols such as peer observation, problem-solving and action research. The study employed both quantitative, using a course evaluation questionnaire with 5-point Likert scales, and qualitative research methods, using pre-training survey, teachers' diary about participant teachers experience during CFG program, field notes and semi-structured interviews with the participant teachers.

This article is based on the implications of this CFG program and draws some suggestions for further studies. The purpose of the study was three-folds: to understand the attitudes of the participants towards CFG programs, to identify the contribution of CFG to the participants' professional development and to clarify the strong and weak points of the program.

Pursuits of these research questions provide useful information for the potential contribution of CFG programs to the professional development teachers. First of all, although not having attended a teacher development program before, at the beginning of the study, all the participants had positive attitudes towards the CFG program at the beginning of the study. In this CFG program, the participant teachers were already familiar with one another and the environment which might lead to the establishment of a sincere professional community as they stated in their diary entries and semi-structured interviews. The results of the course evaluation questionnaire and semi-structured interviews showed that they also responded favorably to the CFG at the end of the program. Since it is a key for reflection, having positive attitudes towards teacher development is crucially prominent.

Secondly, the study aimed to identify the contribution of CFG to the professional development of teachers. One of the ultimate aims of CFG is to create a professional learning community where teachers work collaboratively to look at their practices reflectively (National School Reform Faculty). The findings revealed an increased sense of being a part of professional community. Both in their semi-structured interviews and the diary entries, the participant teachers seemed to embrace the collaborative nature of the CFG program. Feeling a member of this collaborative community, they undoubtedly shared their experiences, which improved their teaching quality.

Finally, the study sought to clarify the strong and weak points of this CFG program. In this CFG program, three participant teachers specifically stated that peer observation protocols provided valuable insights for them to reflect on their practices in the class. As stated by a participant, problem-solving also created great opportunities to find out efficient solutions for the problems taking place during the teaching process. Comments from the suggestions of the participant teachers indicated that this CFG program might include a number of peer observation protocols. In this study, which lasted 8 weeks, there were mainly 2 peer observation protocols and 2 debriefing protocols for the peer observation process. In their semi-structured interviews 3 of the participant teachers recommended that it would have been more beneficial if this CFG program had had more peer observation protocols. They perceived peer observation as highly functioning to learn from each other. Another weakness of this CFG program was the lack of data collection tool which could be used to evaluate the contribution of CFG to students learning.

3. Implications for Further Studies

The findings of this research study suggest a number of implications for further studies. CFG programs have merits as tools for professional development teachers. First, they can push sincere and friendly professional communities forward through collaborative work. They can likely be useful in other groups of teachers who are willing to take the responsibility of their own professional development. Vo & Niguyen (2010) state CFG provides teachers with the opportunity to share their ideas with their colleagues, and help each other to improve professionally. It also stimulates a more motivating teaching atmosphere for teachers since it allows them to feel as a member of professional community based on mutual interaction.

This study clearly showed that CFG programs contributed to the professional development of teachers by establishing professional communities working in collegiality through sincere conversations. In order to achieve this, my observation as a researcher is that it would be ideal to conduct CFG programs in small groups, which let them more room to reflect on their teaching. Otherwise, it would turn out to be a kind of workshop which teachers do not feel ownership. As Yumru (2000) emphasizes, a sense of ownership for the program rested on self-initiation and self-direction is at the heart of a teacher development program. It is also important that the participants are familiar with one another and the environment. By this way, they may feel more relaxed and comfortable, leading to a sincere atmosphere which is the key of establishing a professional community. As stated before, this CFG program took place in the meeting room of the school where the participants work. They also treated one another in a friendly and supportive way.

In a CFG program, protocols also have a variety of benefits:

- They allow for collaborative work.
- They create a safe environment for the participants to ask and answer about challenging questions equally.
- They allot time for teachers to participate in "reflective listening" as well as getting feedback from others without responding (National School Reform Faculty).

The results of this study support the possibility that participants might benefit from different protocols. For instance, three of the participants explained that peer observation was the most beneficial for them as it paved the way to learn from each other, to discover their strong and weak points and to remember their prior experiences while one participant stated that she mostly benefited from problem-solving to get fruitful ideas for her teaching.

Taken together these results reveal that, conducting such kinds of a teacher development program, it would ideal to utilize various kinds of protocols suggested in the website of National School Reform if there is enough time and look at how CFG programs consisting of different protocols might support other groups of teachers' professional development. Jelly (2006, p. 15) claims "meaningful professional development which provides for stimulation and support, for new learning and validation, for challenge and encouragement" must be achieved in teacher development programs. The use of different protocols might create new experiences for teachers to develop professionally.

Zepeda (2008) emphasizes that the most common features of the protocols in a CFG program is to help teachers "to communicate in an organized manner so the focus is on the issue at hand" (p. 234). In this study, I provided guidelines for each protocols as well as samples of some plans such as action research plans. Uncertainty was removed from the protocols, so the conditions for effective sharing were established. Zepeda (2008) also draws our attention to the importance of goals in this method. CFG is characterized by goals, which are clearly stated and related to the purpose of the group. They may be changed as the group members learn from each other, so short-term goals permit long-term goals. Hence, identifying goals at the beginning of the program yields teachers to get a better understanding of what is being learned. An implication of this, CFG protocols need to be established systematically with clear goals stated at the beginning of the programs and guidelines of the protocols for the participants as it is a new method.

Roberts and Pruitt (2003) claim that learning communities promote "school improvement and general consensus about high quality learning activities as essential factors in the improvement of teaching and learning" (p. 1). Senge (1990, cited in Roberts & Pruit, 2003) outlines five elements of a learning community;

- Personal mastery
- Mental models
- Team learning
- Building shared vision
- Systems thinking

Adopting these elements into a learning community create an opportunity for people to learn from each other. Therefore, school authorities need to push forward professional learning communities, which seek to improve teachers' professional development and student learning through creating opportunities for teachers to evaluate their work reflectively and collaboratively.

The protocols in this study were held in the free hours of the participants. Sometimes they seemed to be too tired to get involved in the conversations. Another point was that, sometimes they had to leave the meetings for a few minutes to meet the parents of their students. When they return, I observed it was really difficult for them to adapt the meeting. In general, therefore, it seems that school authorities might create extra time for teachers to hold weekly or monthly meetings. The school administrator even can engage in these meetings as a critical friend rather than a head.

This study clearly showed that CFG programs contributed to the professional development of teachers. It enabled the participant teachers: to develop a sense of professional community working collaboratively, to learn from each other in a constructive and sharing environment, to improve their teaching based on their experiences of CFG protocols, to become more reflective in their teaching, to discover their strengths and weaknesses and finally to establish positive attitudes towards professional development which is a prerequisite in creating effective teaching and learning environment. There is, therefore, a definite need for CFG for teachers' professional development.

Overall, the findings of this study have a number of important implications for future practice. First, implementing CFG in small groups and a familiar atmosphere is the first step toward creating a sincere and friendly professional community working collaboratively. It is also important to note that a number of different protocols need to be implemented in CFG program because teachers may inspire reflection for their teaching thorough the protocols. It is concerning that protocols need to be implemented in a particular CFG program with clear goals and guidelines. Finally, school authorities may provide a space for teachers to engage in CFG since it offers professional development

References

Bolton, G. (2010). *Reflective practice.* London, England: Sage Publications.

Brooks, J., & Brooks, M. (1993). *In search of understanding the case for the constructivist classrooms.* Alexandria, Va: ASCD.

Cannella, G. S., & Reiff, J. C. (1994). Individual constructivist teacher education: Teachers as empowered learners. *Teacher Education Quarterly 21*(3), 27-38.

Cohen, L. G. (2008). *The good, the bad and the messy: The experiences of high school teachers in a critical friends group* (Doctorate thesis, New York University, New York, the USA).

Ellen, E. B. (2007). *The Development and evaluation of a self-study process for critical friends groups* (Master's thesis, The Pennsylvania State University, Pennsylvania, the USA). Retrieved from http://www.alldissertations. com/full.php?id=84434

Harrison, J. (2008). Professional development and the reflective practitioner. In S. Dymoke & J. Harrison (Eds.), *Reflective teaching and learning* (p. 7-40). London, the UK: Sage Publications.

Jasper, M. (2003). *Beginning reflective practice.* Cheltenham, the UK: Nelson Thomes.

Jelly, K. (2006). Reflections as empowerment. A look at increased awareness, dialogue, and agency in one school. Retrieved from http://www.nsrfharmony.org/ research/Jelly_2006.pdf

Lee, I. (2007). Preparing pre-service English teachers for reflective practice. *ELT Journal, 61*(4), 321-329. doi: 10.1093/elt/ccm022 Retrieved from http://eltj.oxfordjournals. org/content/61/4/321.full

National School Reform Faculty. *FAQs about CFG.* Retrieved from http://www.e3smallschools.org /CriticalFriendsGroups.mht

Pettis, J. (2002). Developing our professional competence: some reflections. In J. C. Richards & W. A. Renandya (Eds.), *Methodology in language teaching* (p. 393-397). New York, the USA: Cambridge University Press.

Richards, J. (2011). Towards reflective teaching. Retrieved from: http://www.tttjournal.co.uk/uploads/File/back_articles/Towards_Reflective_Teaching.pdf

Richards, J. C., & Lockhart, C. (1996). *Reflective teaching in second language classrooms.* Melbourne, Australia: Cambridge University Press.

Richardson, V. (1997). Constructivist teaching and teacher education. Theory and practice. In Richardson, V. (Ed.). *Constructivist Teacher Education.* (p. 3-14). Philadelphia: The Framer Press.

Roberts, S. M., & Pruitt, E. Z. (2003). *Schools as professional learning communities.* California, the USA: Corwin.

School Reform Initiative. (2012). *Establishing Critical Friends Groups.* Retrieved from http://www.schoolreforminitiative.org/events/establishing-critical-friends-groups-3-day-new-coaches-institute/

Vo, L. T., & Nguyen, H. T. M. (2010). Critical friends group for EFL teacher professional development. *ELT Journal, 64*(2), 205-213. Retrieved from http://eltj.oxfordjournals.org/ content/early/2009/04/17/elt.ccp025.abstract

Wadhwa, S. (2008). *A handbook of teaching and learning.* Delhi, India: Prabhat Kumar Sharma.

Williams, M. & Burden, R., L. (1997). *Physchology for language teachers: A social constructivist approach.* Cambridge, the U.K: Cambridge University Press.

Yumru, H. (2000). *An ownership approach to teacher development* (Doctorate Thesis, Çukurova University, Adana, Turkey).

Zepeda, S. J. (2008). *Professional development: What works.* New York, the USA: Eye on Education.