

Helping Teachers Work on their own English: A Suggestion for Teacher Development

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Throughout the years, I have been involved in designing materials for and running pre- and in-service training and development courses for EFL teachers in Mexico. In the case of pre-service courses, time is typically spent on familiarizing teachers with basic concepts in linguistics and first and second language acquisition and on providing teachers-to-be with many practical techniques for teaching listening, speaking, reading and writing effectively and communicatively. The best ways to test students' progress and evaluate their abilities, as well as how to put together a good lesson plan and manage a class smoothly, are topics that are always covered, just to name a few more.

In-service workshops can be much more varied and customized, depending on the needs of the specific group of teachers or institution in question. New trends in the field of TESOL are often presented and teachers are usually encouraged to think about the complexities of the teacher-student relationship much more than in a pre-service course. Ideas on how to better reach curricular objectives and how to judge students on similar criteria are shared. Teachers are often invited to become more inquisitive and analytical about their personal styles of teaching so as to discover what will yield better results for them and their students in the future.

In the most successful in-service programs, teachers are consulted about what topics they would like to see covered in workshops and seminars. This usually leads to increased motivation among the faculty, provided such topics are indeed covered, at least to some extent. Although it is naive to think that the goals of educational institutions and the goals of individual teachers will always coincide, there is often more common ground than some teachers and administrators might think.

A case in point is the concern among some teachers, mostly non-native English speakers, that they need to raise the level of their own English language proficiency. Often, it is in order to become eligible for teaching higher level courses in the English programs at their schools or institutions. Others say that it's because they feel that their command of the English language has deteriorated because the only English they use on a regular basis is that contained in the student textbooks they teach from every day. Still others mention that they simply feel it's important to improve as much as possible and never stop learning how to perfect their English. For whatever reason, there is definitely a desire among some teachers to work on their own English, and this sort of need simply cannot be met with a few in-service workshops here and there during the academic year.

Although some institutions may feel that the investment of time and money necessary to offer teachers an ongoing language development/improvement course would be prohibitive and unrealistic, other institutions have come to realize that it is in their own best interest to provide such opportunities for their faculty. With a little creativity and negotiation, they are working towards helping teachers help themselves, and simultaneously, are reaping the benefits of a better-prepared staff overall.

If you are a coordinator or administrator interested in offering EFL teachers at your school an opportunity to work on their English, there are many points to consider before embarking on this project. Some of the basics are:

1. *What kind of budget is there?*

Talk to the school's director about the goals of the project and figure out what resources will be needed and who will be held responsible for what financially. Teachers can be expected to pay something towards their continuing education and development, especially if courses at other institutions are involved, but you definitely want to consider making easy payment plans available to teachers. Perhaps a small amount could be deducted from their paychecks over a long period of time.

2. *What are teachers' needs? What do we hope to achieve?*

Find out what your teachers want and need regarding English improvement. Help them decide on realistic goals. What skill area do they want to work on and what kind of time are they willing to devote to the project?

3. *Who is eligible?*

When does a teacher become eligible for this program? Will there be a seniority requirement?

4. *Can there be an in-house program or do you need external help or input?*

Perhaps you have a master teacher in-house who could prepare a course or several different courses geared specifically to the needs of the teachers involved. Do you have someone at your school who could evaluate a teacher's pronunciation problems and design a course of study for accent reduction, if needed? Or someone who could run a course on current events that would help teachers read more in English and build their vocabularies?

On the other hand, maybe your teachers' needs would be better served by having them attend courses or programs available at other institutions. Do some checking and find out what is available. Binational centers are often a good place to start inquiring.

In conclusion, I'd like to suggest that the overall objective of any in-service program could be summed up in the quotation below from Lovell and Wiles' Supervision for Better Schools, 1983:

There is considerable evidence that supervisors who seek to release the potential of organization members need to produce opportunities for teachers to feel more adequate as professionals, to see greater significance, possibilities and responsibility in their role, and to perceive the situation as one in which improvement is not only possible but highly valued. (p. 55)

If you want to provide EFL teachers with opportunities to grow professionally, I believe in-service programs should include an English language improvement component for the teachers who want and need it. The benefits to be

reaped by teachers, students and institutions alike are well worth the effort and resources expended in the establishment of such a program.