

Chapter 16

Critical Friends Group and Its Impact on Teachers and the Learning Process

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ABSTRACT

This chapter investigates the perceptions, experiences and learning of native and non-native EFL teachers towards in-service teacher education (INSET) through critical friend group (CFG) in a language preparatory program, at a private high school in the western part of Turkey. Specifically, the study identifies the specific aspects of CFG which might enhance teacher-learning and finally, better understand their perceptions towards reflective practice. The participants were four EFL teachers offering English lessons in a preparatory class at the high school. Data were collected through interviews, video recordings, and reflective essays. The findings revealed that participating in CFG has promoted teacher-learning through collaboration as it became the vehicle that facilitated teachers to alter their classroom practices, which in return, supported the learning process in their classrooms.

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

Teachers are the most important asset in the development process of a society as they are the ones shaping the future generations with their knowledge and experience. There are many requisite certifications, exams, and qualifications required to become an EFL teacher. However, teaching EFL is a dynamic field which is continuously evolving, thus requires serious dedication after stepping foot into the classroom. Farrell (2013) states that many experienced teachers have negative feelings about professional development courses because they are imposed on the teachers by the administration while most of the time teachers are not consulted about the topics of these courses. Richards and Farrell (2005) emphasize the need for a bottom-up approach to professional development where teachers decide on how and what they want

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to develop since different needs unfold at different stages in the teacher career cycle. Altun (2011) suggested in his article that the world has been rapidly changing, thus the need for teachers to keep up with this pace in terms of the changing requirements in teaching skills. Consequently, the subject of teaching language itself has become dynamic, ever developing, and continuous. Teachers need to develop and adapt their core skills in parallel with changing student profiles, curriculum as well as the technology and the world itself. Unfortunately, EFL teachers in Turkey do not receive adequate in-service teacher education (ISTE) unless they are intrinsically motivated and have attended ELT seminars and workshops outside of school. Furthermore, Küçüksüleymanoğlu (2006) states that teachers suffer from many insufficiencies regarding variety, sustainability, time limits, and implementation. The responsibility falls on the shoulders of the in-service teachers to collaborate and exchange their knowledge and experiences. Thus, this can be achieved through INSET by means of Critical Friend Groups (CFG).

The present study is based on the idea put forward by Vygotsky's sociocultural theory that (1978,1981,1986; cited in Johnson & Golombek, 2013) suggested human cognition to be intrinsically social since it is acquired from social interaction which is then personalized as a psychological tool for thinking. In parallel, Roberts (2016) suggested that the nature of teacher development is closely affected by social environment. As a result, teacher learning naturally recognizes the interplay between the teacher's social environment and individual dynamics. Therefore, there is a need for teacher training programs that allow educators to interact and learn from the experiences of one another. To this end, the present study aims to use CFG as a platform where teachers reflect on classroom issues while trying to solve them collaboratively and address the following research questions:

1. What were the perceptions of teachers towards practicing reflective teaching methods through CFG?
2. What aspects of CFG assisted in the professional development of the participants?
3. What were the challenges experienced by the teachers and how were they overcome?
4. What sort of change has occurred through CFG that would not have been visible with other forms of INSET?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Teacher education has been affected greatly by discussions on reflection, progressive education and personal experience by Dewey (1978), one of the chief intellectuals of experiential learning. Dewey's thoughts have shaped schooling and teacher education by providing a basis for later progressive and person-centered learning methods since he defined reflection as methodical, intentional, definitive and critical thought feeding psychological and moral development.

According to Dewey, reflective thought emerges when a situation proposing alternative solutions is present or interrupts normal activity as a perplexity. Reflective thought has five stages; feeling of discrepancy, observation to define difficulty, cultivation of different suggestions to solve the problem, thinking through the indications of suggestions comprehensively to select the best for solution, and observation to confirm the solution and adoption as personal knowledge. It can be suggested that Dewey's reflection theory can be well adapted to LTE since it contributes to personal development by enabling problems to be reframed in various ways where a wider range of alternative solutions are present and thus, contributing to broaden perspective. Furthermore, Schön (1987) supported reflective thought by

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