



Exploring EFL Teacher Educators' Experiences of Professional Learning from their Teaching Experiences: Debre Markos College of Teacher Education in Focus

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Abstract

This study aimed to investigate the professional learning experiences of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teacher educators derived from their teaching practices. To accomplish this, a qualitative research approach with a phenomenological design was employed. Six experienced EFL teacher educators were purposefully selected as participants, and data was collected through in-depth interviews and narrative frames. The data obtained from these data collection tools were analyzed qualitatively using the thematic analysis. The findings revealed that EFL teacher educators held a positive outlook on learning from their teaching experiences, believing it significantly contributes to their professional development. The findings also showed that EFL teacher educators used different professional learning strategies such as lesson planning, particular classroom events/situations, self-assessment and reflection to learn from their teaching experiences. Based on these findings, it was recommended that EFL teacher educators should share their experiences of learning how to learn from one's teaching experiences. Besides, teacher education colleges should prepare workshops that enhance EFL teacher educators' professional learning from their teaching experiences, and it is advised that other researchers should conduct studies related to this area focusing on one of the English language skills so that they can meaningfully contribute to the field of knowledge and practice in EFL teaching.

Keywords: Teacher educator, Professional learning, Teaching experience, Reflection

1. Introduction

Currently, the teaching and learning of English as a foreign language has faced numerous challenges globally, and Ethiopia is no exception. Consequently, students cannot master English language easily and their English language proficiency is deteriorating in alarming rate. This decline significantly impacts their academic performance and future job prospects (Fahim et al, 2017; Jha, 2013; Khan et al, 2020; Levrints, 2022). A major factor contributing to these challenges is the inadequate competency of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers/educators in both subject matter and pedagogical knowledge. Recognizing this issue, researchers and language educators have dedicated considerable efforts to improve the quality of English language teaching and learning. One of the efforts they have made is exploring professional learning strategies that enable EFL teachers/educators to enhance their expertise in English language subject matter and pedagogy (Dadvand & Behzadpoor, 2020; Richards and Farewell, 2005). Thus, different EFL teacher professional development programs such as pre-service and in-service teacher training programs, short and long-term training programs and workshops have been introduced at different times (Richards and Farewell, 2005). However, these traditional, top-down teacher professional development programs cannot bring the required EFL teachers' professional development and quality of EFL teaching (Hayes and Chang, 2012). In these teacher professional development programs, EFL teachers are viewed as passive recipients of knowledge given by external experts, and they are requested to apply this knowledge in their classrooms (Borg, 2015; Farewell, 2020; Woodward, 2017).

Nowadays, thus, it is argued that EFL/ESL professional learning should focus on the complex and diverse nature of the work of EFL teaching and learning, and it should make EFL teachers both practitioners and theory builders (Freeman, 2015; Richards and Farrell, 2011; Smith, 2020). Thus, it is believed that EFL teachers can learn about their profession from their teaching experiences. If they learn from their teaching experiences, they can take responsibility for setting their professional learning goals based on their own needs, pace, EFL classroom contexts and the problems they face in their teaching (Lee et al., 2019). Moreover, learning from one's own teaching experiences provides hands-on, experiential and practical professional learning activities that can be directly linked to classroom reality. It makes EFL professional learning lifelong (Johnson and Brown, 2018; Smith, 2017). When EFL teachers learn from their teaching experiences, they assess, analyze and reflect on their teaching. This, in turn, makes them identify their weaknesses, strengths and areas of improvement in their teaching (Richards and Farrell, 2005).

In Ethiopia, teacher professional development in general, and EFL teacher professional development, in particular, is also considered an essential component and strategy to improve teacher quality and student learning (Ministry of Education, 2009). Thus, it is argued that teachers at each school level should take different workshops, and different professional training programs like continuous professional development and Higher Diploma Program (HDP). However, studies indicated that using only these top-down professional learning strategies cannot help teachers develop their profession effectively (Melaku and Abeya, 2018; Tewodros and Wudu, 2018). As a result, experienced-based professional learning has

become an issue of growing interest in Ethiopian schools (Ministry of Education, 2015). More importantly, it is argued that since teachers in higher education are knowledgeable enough to identify the gaps from their teaching experiences and fill their gaps with the current teaching and learning approaches, experienced-based professional learning can fill the gaps of the top-down professional strategies. Birhanu (2014) also found that self-initiated professional development is favoured compared to top-down professional development practices as it gives EFL teachers the freedom to be responsible for their career improvement.

Although teachers in general, and EFL teachers/teacher educators in particular, are often encouraged to critically analyze their teaching experiences and learn from their teaching experiences, little research, particularly in the Ethiopian context is conducted. For example, Birhanu(2014) found that secondary school EFL teachers perceive self-initiative professional development positively although their practice is low. Tessema and Belihu(2023) explored Addis Ababa Science and Technology University EFL teachers' perceptions and practices of self-initiated professional development. The findings indicated that the majority of the EFL teachers had a positive perception. However, their practices on self-initiative practice activities were very low. These two researchers focused on EFL teachers' perceptions and practices of self-initiated professional development, which is very general. They did not focus on a specific kind of self-initiated professional strategy like learning from teaching experiences. In addition, the above researchers did not focus on experienced EFL teacher educators, but this study focused on experienced EFL teacher educators. Therefore, this study explored the professional learning experiences of EFL

teacher educators on their teaching experiences.

2. Research Questions

This study answers the following research questions.

1. How do EFL teacher educators perceive their experience of professional learning from teaching experiences?
2. What strategies do EFL teacher educators use to develop their profession from their teaching experiences?

3. Materials and Methods

3.1. The Research Approach and Design

This research is a type of qualitative research approach with a phenomenological research design. This approach and design were employed as they are more appropriate to capture individual experiences within a phenomenon being studied and to understand the hidden meanings and essences the groups experienced.

3.2. The Site and Participants of the Study

The researchers selected Debre Markos College of Teacher Education as a research site purposefully for three reasons. First, the college is near the place where the researchers work, so they can collect detailed qualitative data until the data is saturated. Second, the participants of this college are familiar with the researchers. This familiarity, on the other hand, helps the researchers to collect detailed qualitative data freely. In light of this, Bryman (2008) and Dornyei (2007) state that the research site and participant accessibility to the researchers, particularly to qualitative researchers, should be taken into account as the researcher is expected to

meet, communicate and collect data with the participants multiple times until he/she obtains adequate data. To collect data from this college, six experienced EFL teacher educators who have more than 25 years of teaching experience and actively involved in learning from their experiences were selected purposefully as samples of the study. To identify the extent the participants were involved in professional development activities, particularly using their teaching experiences, the snowball sampling technique, a part of the purposive sampling technique was used. These EFL teacher educators were selected as a sample of the study for the following reasons. First, the nature of a phenomenological study needs participants who have good experiences with the phenomenon being studied. Second, it is believed that experienced EFL teacher educators can have a better profession, professional development practices and learning from their teaching experiences so that the researchers can get detailed data.

3.3 Data Collection Instruments

The main data collection instrument for this study was an in-depth interview as it is used to gather detailed data about the experience of individuals on a phenomenon being investigated. The researchers used semi-structured interviews which consisted of 5 interview questions. However, under three interview items (items 1, 3 and 5), there were probing questions which were used to ask the participants additional information, particularly when they gave inadequate data. Regarding the contents of the items, while items 1, 2, 3 and 4 were used to gather data about the perceived experiences of EFL teacher educators on professional learning from their teaching experience, item five was used to gather data about how EFL teacher educators learn from the teaching experiences.

In addition, narrative frames, a guideline of questions that contain open-ended questions, short answers and blank spaces were used to support the interview data. The number of narrative frame items was six, two open-ended items, two short answers, and two fill-the-blank spaces. The contents of the items of the narrative frames were also used to narrate their perceived experiences of learning from teaching practices and the strategies they used when they attempted to learn from their teaching experiences. To collect data using these tools, first narrative frames were given to the participants and made them narrate their perceived experiences and the strategies they used to learn from their teaching experience. After the data was collected using narrative frames, in-depth data was collected using semi-structured interview items.

3.4. Data Analysis Techniques

To analyze the data, a qualitative data analysis technique was used, particularly using Moustakas's (1994) and Saladana's (2013) guidelines for phenomenological analysis. Based on these guidelines, the following steps were used to analyze the data. First, the researchers stated their epoche and bracketed their predispositions from the topic during data collection and analysis. Second, the researchers organized the data in the way it was managed and analyzed. To do this, the researchers used the following steps: (a) they listened and understood the interview data, (b) they transcribed the interview data and read and re-read the data until they understood the data in detail, (c) they listed each non-repetitive and non-overlapping statements and recorded all of them in a separate word file. After doing these, the third step the researchers did was coding, categorising, clustering and thematizing the data. Fourth, the invariant meaning units and themes were synthesized into a description of the textures

of the experience, including verbatim examples and quotations. Finally, the researchers developed a description of the meanings and essences of the experience.

4. Results and Discussions

4.1. Results

After analyzing the data and reviewing the component themes related to each research question, the researchers' identified four overarching themes for the study. These themes include positive perspectives and experiences of EFL teacher educators of learning from their teaching experiences, learning from lesson plan development, specific classroom events, and self-assessment and reflection. To ensure the themes were derived from the actual shared experiences of the participants, the participants' experiences were quoted under each theme. When quoting the participants' experiences, a representative sample of responses was used as it is difficult to quote all of the respondents' experiences

4.1.1. EFL Teacher Educators' Perceived Experiences of Professional Learning from Teaching Experiences

The first research question was designed to explore EFL teacher educators' perceived experiences of professional learning from their teaching experiences. Thus, one meaningful theme was revealed to answer this research question. The theme was EFL teacher educators have positive perspectives and experiences on learning from their teaching actions.

4.1.1.1 Positive Perspectives and Experiences of EFL Teacher Educators

The data obtained from in-depth interviews and narrative frames indicated that EFL

teacher educators have positive perspectives and experiences on learning from one's teaching experiences. They feel that learning from their teaching experiences enhances their professional development in different ways. For, example, Miru, the first participant, in the narrative frames and in-depth interview stated that seeing back his actual teaching makes him critically analyze his teaching experiences. This in turn enables him to identify his strengths and weaknesses and areas of improvement in his teaching. In light of this, Miru, during an interview stated, "I feel that seeing one's [my] teaching actions back helps me in different ways. For example, whenever I teach, I see back my teaching actions, identify my weaknesses and strengths and improve my future lessons. Thus, I believe [believe] it is very important for teacher professional development." This quote implies that seeing back one's teaching positively impacts teaching quality and student learning.

Zemen, the second participant, also considers his teaching experiences as the best school for his professional development. He states examining his teaching during and after the class helps him to explore his strengths and weaknesses and gain invaluable insights into improving his teaching. His actual words confirm it like this. "I learn a lot from my teaching experiences. It is the best school for my professional development. I learn from it through self-assessment and reflection. When I face a problem, I assess myself and reflect. I identify my strengths and weaknesses." From this quote, one can infer that introspecting one's teaching experiences provides EFL teachers with professional learning opportunities in their workplace, and it enhances ownership of professional learning through self-assessment and reflection.

Mesifin and Belay, the third and the fifth participants, feel that practical experience is invaluable for their professional development, and from their experiences. For example, Mesifin's actual words confirm it like this. "By assessing my weaknesses and strengths of my teaching practices, I identify specific areas of improvement, for example, my way of teaching, managing the class, understanding students' needs and background." This quote also implies that if EFL teachers engage in learning from their teaching experiences, they can easily identify authentic and immediate problems in their teaching and find solutions for those teaching problems.

However, Muhabaw and Meketaw, the fourth and the sixth participants feel that experience can be a means of professional learning when it is supported by top-down training programs like in-service training and other short training programs. Meketaw summarizes this in his actual words like this. "In my opinion, I feel experience by itself may not be used as a professional learning. It should be supported by training, training given by experts. If experience is supported by theory, that is good." From this, the researchers inferred that although Meketaw and Muhabaw believe that learning from teaching practice has its role in teacher professional development, it will be more effective when it is supported by theory.

4.1.2. EFL Teacher Educators' Ways of Professional Learning from Teaching Experiences

The second research question aimed to explore the strategies that EFL teacher educators use to learn from their teaching experiences. Through the analysis of data, three key themes emerged. These themes include learning from lesson plan development, specific classroom events, and assessment and reflection.

4.1.2.1 Learning from Lesson Plan Development

As the data obtained from in-depth interviews and narrative frames indicated, the participants learn several things when they prepare a lesson plan. When they develop a lesson plan, they identify what to teach, why to teach and how to teach. This, on the other hand, makes them know more about the contents of the lesson, assessment techniques, teaching methods and the objectives of the lesson. They also learn more when they reflect on the lesson plan and identify their strengths and weaknesses. For example, Miru states it like this.

You know as a teacher, you prepare a lesson, and that lesson plan can make you ready about[for] actual teaching. And again in the actual teaching, I have just tried to teach according to my lesson plan. According to [the] objective, I have to evaluate my teaching-learning process, and I have to jot down [what] I am missing. If I feel to achieve my objective, I have to jot down at the end. I can see back [in] the actual teaching what was going on, what was not. I also ask questions like was it my problem? Was it the students' problem? So what could be the remedy?

From this quote, one can infer that a lesson plan is a means of preparing and evaluating one's teaching and enhancing the arts of EFL teaching classrooms.

Muhabaw and Belay also explained that a lesson plan is a guide for their teaching their preparation. For example, Muhabaw's verbatim statements show this as follows.

Without [a] lesson plan, a teacher may face a problem of teaching.. ...therefore, a lesson plan helps me to plan what I should do in an orderly manner, so I do it by thinking critically, my delimitation for my teaching. Thus, it is my delimitation, guideline and mirror for my daily teaching. Therefore, it is a big road map for professional development. It is a great input for my profession.

From this quote, one can infer that a lesson plan development is a platform for Muhaba's professional development, quality teaching and student learning. More importantly, the quote indicates that a lesson plan is a means of observing the teaching and future improvements in one's teaching and learning.

4.1.2.2 Learning from Classroom Events/Situations

As the interview data indicated, the participants underscored classroom events/contexts as their core means of professional learning. They described that they learn through critically observing, questioning and reflecting on their classroom events. Examining the classroom events, on the other hand, made them raise different types of questions, for example, why a particular classroom problem occurs, why the students are interested/dissatisfied in the lesson, and what major challenges and successes they face. Then, they attempted to critically examine their methods of teaching. In this regard, Zemen reflected the following.

In the classroom, there might be discipline problems. ...if the students are interested in my lesson, they are eager

[and] they are much disciplined. ...Those students who are disturbing in the classroom are not interested in my lesson. I know that, therefore, I ask them questions whether they are interested or not, what is the problem with them or with me. Finally, after class, I ask [asked] questions like was my lesson interesting or not? What were the major challenges and successes of my lesson? Why [did] my students disturb the class? Thus, I prepared myself for the next lesson.

In the same vein, Mesifin reflected the following.

Practice or experience is [the]best school to learning [learn], to develop our pedagogical knowledge, language skills and knowledge. When we learn from practice, we learn in the classroom. I learn from my practice, both in the classroom and outside the classroom.

These quotations imply that observing classroom problems are means of EFL teachers' professional learning, identifying their gaps in knowledge, skills and methods of the English language. This, in turn, makes them identify students' ability, interest and readiness for EFL learning in real classroom contexts.

Moreover, Muhabaw states that he learns a lot about his pedagogical practices by constantly looking into his classroom

events/problems, and this, on the other hand, enables him to integrate working and learning.

Meketaw and Belay too learn about their observation by observing their classroom events. Meketaw, for example, states it like this. "I learn a lot from classroom events. I assess my teaching practices.... By engaging with these problems[practices], I try to improve myself through reading, watching or listen [listening] to EFL materials." This quote implies that EFL classroom events are used as sources of his professional learning and improvement of his pedagogical content knowledge through reading, watching or listening to EFL materials.

4.1.2.3 Learning from Self-Assessment and Reflection

Self-assessment and reflection are the other strategies experienced by all of the participants to develop their profession. For example, in the narrative frames, Miru described that he learns about his teaching by raising different types of questions and making reflections before, during and after the class. The interview data also indicated that Miru examines his teaching actions, reflects on them and differentiates his strong and weak sides of teaching. He mentioned his experiences as follows.

You know, as a teacher I have to evaluate my teaching..., and I have to jot down [what] I am missing. I can see back the actual teaching what was going on[and] what was not. I also ask questions like was it my problem? Was it the students' problem? So what could be the remedy and the like? In this regard, I fill in what I missed in the next lesson.

This implies that assessing oneself by raising different kinds of questions and making reflections on teaching practices are seen as key to Miru's EFL professional growth and relate theory to practice.

Zemen and Mesifin too consider self-assessment and reflection as their day-to-day activities. They critically examine their classroom practices and assess their strengths and weaknesses. More importantly, Zemen states that he does reflections before, during and after an EFL lesson and he learns a lot from each reflection. He states his experience as follows.

It is my routine activity to reflect. Therefore, I try to use all types of reflection because they are very necessary. At a[the] very beginning, as a teacher ... [I] should think over what is going on to implement in the classroom. Therefore, I try to reflect on the content,... the objectives, the methods,... and assessment techniques, whether they would be effective or not. while I am teaching in the classroom as well, I try to reflect on my lesson. I ask different questions for myself. Then, after that, I try to evaluate my lesson and I reflect and put my reflection on my lesson plan as well. Therefore, at every step of the lesson, there is reflection and improvement of oneself.

This quote implies that Zemen reacts, examines and evaluates his teaching practices before, during and after his teaching so that he can make decisions on his teaching. It also implies that through reflection Zemen

recognizes his teaching dilemma and experiments on it to explore the solutions to his teaching problems.

Finally, Muhabaw, Meketaw and Belay reported that they learn more when they engage in self-assessment and reflection. Through self-assessment and reflection, they can identify what worked well, what challenges they encountered and what strategies they used to address the challenges. This implies that using reflections, they assessed the effectiveness of their teaching methods, assessment techniques, teaching activities and areas of improvement.

4.2 Discussions

By triangulating the findings of the present and previous studies and interpreting them, the following discussions were made. Thus, the findings of the present study revealed that EFL teacher educators have positive perspectives and experiences of professional learning from their teaching experiences. It was also found that the participants learn from their teaching experiences in different ways: they learn from lesson plan development, classroom events/problems, self-assessment and reflection.

Concerning EFL teacher educators' perceived experience, it was found that the participants feel learning from their teaching experiences enhances their professional growth in different ways: it makes them see back their teaching experiences, identify their strengths and weaknesses and reflect on their teaching practices. This, in turn, enables them to identify areas of improvement in their teaching practices. Similarly, Birhanu(2014), Hailu(2022) and Tesema and Behailu(2023) found that EFL teachers had positive perceptions of self-initiated professional development activities although these studies did not indicate on which kinds of self-initiated professional

learning strategies EFL teachers have positive perceptions. Degife (2022) also investigated Addis Ababa secondary school EFL teachers' professional development experiences through reflective practice, which is part of learning from teaching experience. The findings revealed that EFL teachers have good perceptions of professional development from reflection. Outside Ethiopia, Johnson and Brown(2018) and Smith(2020) found that when language teachers engage to reflect within their teaching contexts, they feel that their professional learning is facilitated so that they can adopt and implement diverse teaching methods. Farrell (2015) also found that EFL teachers feel positive when they learn from their teaching experiences. These findings imply that learning about EFL teaching from real classroom practices provides opportunities for EFL teacher educators to engage in learning experiences that are directly connected to their teaching context and subject matter expertise.

In light of the ways or strategies EFL teacher educators employed to learn from their teaching experiences, it was found that EFL teachers used lesson planning, classroom events/problems, self-assessment and reflection. For example, when EFL teachers prepare a lesson plan, they explore multiple aspects of EFL pedagogical content knowledge. Engaging in lesson plan development also provides EFL teacher educators opportunities to think deeply about what to teach, how to teach and why to teach. Similarly, Richards and Renandya(2020) found that through the process of lesson planning, EFL teachers can critically analyze their teaching practices, identify areas for improvement, and make informed decisions about instructional strategies. Harmer (2007) added that through the process of lesson planning, EFL teachers can learn how to

design teaching techniques and classroom activities.

These findings imply that lesson plan development is one of their sources of reflection and assessment. Their reflection and assessment of their teaching also provide opportunities for achieving the learning objectives.

The findings of this study also indicated that EFL teacher educators can learn by observing, questioning and reflecting on the problems that occur in EFL classrooms. During and after an EFL lesson, they raised questions like why class problems occur, why students are dissatisfied and what challenges and successes they face in their teaching. They also examined the effectiveness of their teaching method. Similarly, Burns (2010) found that EFL teachers examine and reflect on their classroom events so that they can address the problems that occur in EFL classrooms. From these findings, one can infer that EFL teacher educators' professional learning is likely shaped by the classroom events that occur in EFL classrooms. This, on the other hand, makes them note that the classroom events/contexts are their source of pedagogical knowledge.

On the other hand, other local studies, for example, Degfie(2022) found that EFL teachers' examination of teaching practices and conducting reflection on their teaching practices were very low though they believed that they often used a considerable number of reflective activities on their teaching practices. Tesema and Behailu(2023) also found that EFL teachers did not use different kinds of work-embedded professional learning activities such as keeping a teaching journal, conducting action research, reflecting on their teaching, or developing a teaching portfolio

Finally, the findings reveal that EFL teacher educators take self-assessment and reflection as the major strategies for their professional growth. By critically examining their classroom practices and students' feedback, they learn a lot about their pedagogical practices and the contents of the subject they teach. Likewise, Farrell (2015) and Smith and Johnson (2018) found that by critically examining and reflecting on their teaching experiences, EFL teachers can gain insights into their strengths, weaknesses and areas for improvement.

The findings of the present and previous studies indicate that self-assessment and reflection are means of professional learning strategies for EFL teachers/educators. They allow EFL teachers to gain a deeper understanding of their teaching practices, strengths and areas for improvement. This, on the other hand, makes them aware of which instructional strategies work well and which of those need adjustment. This in turn enables them to identify areas where they can enhance their knowledge, skills and methods of teaching the English language which leads them in a continuous professional development process.

4.3 Conclusion

Based on the findings of the study, it was concluded that EFL teacher educators have positive perspectives and experiences of professional learning from their teaching experiences. They feel that learning from their teaching experiences enhances their subject matter knowledge and pedagogical practices. As a result, they consider teaching experience as the impetus of their professional growth. It was also concluded that EFL teacher educators learned from their teaching experiences using different strategies such as lesson planning, examining classroom events/problems, self-assessment and reflection. Using these strategies, they see back their teaching

experiences, analyze these experiences, identify their strengths and weaknesses and differentiate areas of their professional improvement. The findings of this study imply that professional learning in English as a Foreign Language (EFL), derived from teaching experiences, has significant implications for the development of the EFL teaching profession. Firstly, EFL teachers who critically examine and reflect on their experiences can identify effective strategies and areas needing improvement. This process leads to enhanced instructional strategies and better classroom management. Additionally, continuous learning from practical experience enables EFL teachers to adapt, innovate, and integrate new techniques and tools to address diverse student needs. More importantly, real-world teaching experiences equip teachers with practical skills that theoretical training may not fully cover. These skills include managing diverse classroom dynamics and addressing individual student needs effectively.

4.4 Recommendations

- Since teaching experiences are considered the primary source of professional learning for EFL educators, it is essential for EFL teacher educators to regularly reflect on their teaching practices using various methods such as journals, discussions, self-assessment tools, peer observations, and feedback mechanisms.
- EFL teacher educators should also establish professional learning communities used to provide opportunities for teachers to collaborate, share experiences, and discuss challenges and solutions related to EFL teaching.
- Teacher education colleges should design workshops that focus on real

classroom scenarios, share experiences of EFL teaching and learning and address practical issues and offer hands-on strategies.

- Additionally, teacher education colleges need to develop and maintain libraries of teaching resources, best practices, and case studies that EFL teacher educators can access for inspiration and practical advice. They should also provide training and support for integrating technology into the classroom, utilizing tools that can enhance teaching based on educators' experiences.
- It is advisable for researchers to conduct studies focused on specific English language skills. Such research can meaningfully contribute to the field of EFL teaching by advancing knowledge and practice.

Acknowledgement

We would like to express our sincere gratitude to EFL teacher educators of Debre Markos College of Teachers Education for their cooperation in providing genuine and valid data for the success of this study.

Funding Information

This research did not get any funds from research grant agencies.

Declaration of Conflict

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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