

The importance of Continuing Professional Development

Teachers who engage in continuing professional development (CPD) tend to be more stimulated and enthusiastic professionals for whom teaching is far more than just a job.

Article written by NILE Senior Trainers.

What can CPD do for you?

CPD also takes into account the fact that teachers may not always work in the same context. In fact, every class is unique and has its own delights and challenges. The arrival of a student with different needs, a change in the curriculum or the introduction of a new piece of technology are just a few of the situations that we need to be able to respond to. Keeping up to date, not only with new technologies, but also with the way students' needs are changing, can seem overwhelming and a CPD programme can provide a portal to understanding the situation fully, with guidance and support to put it into practice.

Coping with change

While initial pre-service teacher training often tells us what to do and how, it may not help us to see why or how we can adapt our methods to suit different circumstances. Conversely, some teacher training is very academic and teaches educational theory without giving us the tools to effectively apply this to a range of teaching contexts. CPD allows us to explore what we have learnt with reference to our everyday classroom experience. At best, it also encourages us to question the status quo in teaching methodology and to formulate and articulate our own beliefs. This gives us a sense of ownership and confidence in our everyday classroom practice. It allows us to make very small or more major changes in the way we use materials, plan our lessons or manage our classes.



Confidence breeds confidence

As we feel more self-assured about a new skill or knowledge, we often want to continue learning about it and share this enthusiasm with others. Before we know it, we realise that we are growing professionally, are less fearful of trying out new ideas and may embrace opportunities to take on fresh challenges, such as teaching different types of classes, giving workshops or even putting ourselves forward for promotion. This leads to a feeling of taking more ownership of our careers.

Treat yourself to learning and development!

Good CPD is often very enjoyable, sociable and exciting. There may be chances to get to know other teachers from different contexts, or even different countries, and possibly to travel abroad.

What can CPD do for your learners?

And do students benefit from having CPD-active teachers? Whether it results in teachers adding more variety to their lessons, managing the class more effectively or just being more confident and in a better mood, this is sure to help student motivation and interest.

Different types of CPD

— Courses

CPD can, of course, take many forms. If we have time and funding, we may go on teacher development courses that are delivered locally, nationally or internationally, where we mix with other teachers exploring and sharing focussed ideas that we can bring back to our classrooms. Online teacher development courses open out these opportunities to a much wider range of teachers, and participants are often surprised at how collaborative and supportive some of the smaller, tutor-led online courses are.

Taking courses isn't the only way for teachers to develop, of course. Some teachers prefer to find more bottom-up approaches to CPD that are easy and free or cheap to adopt.

— Fresh ideas

This can be as simple as trying out a new idea. By reading blogs, articles or books, or listening to podcasts and watching online videos or webinar recordings about methodology, we can pick up plenty of fresh ideas to liven up our teaching or solve a problem that has been bothering us. A motivating way to start is in collaboration with others. Reading groups within a school or a teaching community can be a great way to start. Teachers can be invited to all read the same article, or different articles on the same topic, and then to come together to discuss what they have read and how it could be applied to their teaching situation. Then they try the ideas out, make notes on how it went (What went well? What didn't? What would need to change next time?) and share their ideas. Of course, this can also be done individually and it pays to be organised and keep brief descriptions and our reflections in one place where we can build up a repertoire of techniques, activities and ideas.

— Reflecting on teaching

Reflection is also valuable on a day-to-day basis. Taking a couple of minutes at the end of each lesson to note down what you learnt can be invaluable. One way to do this is to focus on a critical incident – a significant moment that makes us stop and think. It could be positive or negative or just something interesting. For example, a teacher is struggling to help Learner A with understanding a grammatical structure in English and Learner B interrupts and tells Learner A what it means in their own language. Learner A immediately understands and starts using the structure correctly. It will be interesting to reflect on not only why this happened, but also how the teacher felt about it (grateful, annoyed, threatened, amused?) and what action point they have learnt from it (e.g. Try to elicit comparisons with L1 where appropriate).



● Observe and learn from each other

To get a more objective view we can video ourselves teaching or ask a colleague to observe us and give feedback. An informal peer observation programme could be set up. It is usually best to make this voluntary and to focus on positive two-way learning rather than negative judgements. This observation scheme can be particularly useful if a group of teachers are working on an action research project – maybe you are all trying to solve an interesting problem by collecting data and using the results to devise and put into practice some action points. Here the observation focus may, in fact, be more on the learners than on the teacher.

● Stages of an action research project

- Teachers complain that learners won't speak English in discussion tasks, so they decide to find out why through classroom observation and interviewing students.
- Teachers devise a questionnaire for students about how they feel about speaking English in discussion activities and administer this.
- The teachers analyse the results and identify the main reasons given (e.g. I can't think of anything to say, I don't know a lot of the words I need).
- Teachers observe each other's classes, trying to put themselves in the shoes of the learners to see if these reasons seem valid and what could be done about them.
- Teachers meet and decide what action they can take (e.g. they decide that students need more preparation time before discussion activities, but they are short of classroom time, so they want to see if giving students the topic in the previous lesson and allowing them to search online for ideas and language they might need will help).
- Teachers try this out and observe each other's classes again to see if oral participation has improved and see if further action is needed (e.g. it was better but some students needed more guidance for the homework task).

● Over to you

These are just a few ideas that teachers can try out. CPD can range from taking a Master's degree in language teaching to making a brief note after class of what needs to be done differently next time you teach that unit. We can undertake CPD alone or in groups. By collaborating with others, through our institutions, through teacher associations or through social media groups, we can take inspiration from a community to build a more fulfilling career for ourselves, and provide more engaged and effective learning for our students.



CPD ideas

Here is a list of CPD suggestions.
You could ...

- try out a new teaching idea (and ask a colleague to observe you and give you feedback, or video yourself for reflection afterwards).
- write an article for the school newsletter/blog/website or start your own blog (this could be about an article you have read or some activities you use in your class, for example).
- listen to ELT-related podcasts (you may even be inspired to make one of your own!).
- mentor a new colleague (ask your line manager if you can do this, or set up a scheme if this doesn't exist in your institution).
- start a peer observation scheme.
- start an ideas board in the staffroom on different topics (this could be about an aspect of classroom management, e.g. how to encourage students to speak more L2 in class; or about a type of activity, e.g. fun ways to practise grammar or motivating reading tasks).



- set up an English Language Teaching reading group (everyone could read an article or blog post and discuss it) or a discussion group to share classroom issues and solutions.
- set up an action research project.
- lead an INSET (in service training) session for colleagues (you could also invite other local teachers).
- present at a local conference.
- set up a mini-conference for local teachers to share ideas.
- use social media (e.g. YouTube, Instagram) to share your projects.
- subscribe to blogs and newsletters by English Language Teaching professionals, organisations and publishers.
- look for opportunities to teach a level you have never taught before, or a different class type (e.g. exam preparation or Business English) and ask for support.
- **... keep this journal for reflection and action planning.**