

Professionalism in Foreign Language Teaching: An Everlasting Challenge

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For decades, the field of teaching English as a foreign language has been under the microscope in constantly evaluating teachers' traits, performance, skills, attitudes, competencies, and practices as professionals they are. According to Vanassche and Kelchtermans (2014), "professionalism is conceived of as manifesting itself in teacher educators' actions and behaviors in practice. It is reflected in four questions: 'what happens?'; 'why is this happening?'; 'what do we think of this and why?'; and 'should we try to change this practice, and why would this change be an improvement?'"

Nonetheless, one of the greatest concerns in this research study is the fact that some teachers still need to comply with the standards of excellence and commitment in second language teaching and the regulations of higher education institutions. These standards of excellence basically demand teacher competence development for better learning outcomes since teachers "...are expected to possess high levels of specialist knowledge, expertise, commitment and trustworthiness" (Leung, 2012, p. 22). The new demands of a globalized world require professionals to resort to the latest trends in language teaching; within this orientation, several competencies are expected features of an English teacher: professional development, responsibilities, collaboration, reflection, language awareness, classroom management, research, strategies and methodologies, decision making skills, among others.

Such profile challenges professionals to reinvent their current practices to successfully comply with quality in education. As Hardy (2011) expressed, "The roles of teachers and schools are changing, and so are expectations about them: teachers are asked to teach in

increasingly multicultural classrooms, integrate students with special needs, use ICT for teaching effectively, engage in evaluation and accountability processes [...]” (p. 7).

As professionalism is an everlasting challenge, this paper aims at evaluating the competencies that EFL teachers possess and continuous professional development activities which make them professional in this field. To accomplish this objective, a group of 30 EFL teachers in higher level education was surveyed to determine their qualifications and competencies in their work. The following research questions were stated:

Q1- What are EFL teachers doing nowadays to demonstrate their professionalism in the field of language teaching?

Q2- How do teachers value their own professional practices?

Q3- What should EFL teachers improve to be one of the best professionals in their field?

Q4- What kind of activities do teachers pursue for professional development?

This study is exploratory and qualitative in nature as it intends to gather data on the features which make ELT teachers professional in their field of expertise. From the participant professors’ appraisal, a series of qualifications were surveyed through an online questionnaire which includes personal information questions, and other items about teaching competencies, development activities, traits of great teachers, pedagogical practices and challenges. Most of the participants work at public universities in Costa Rica (UCR, UNA, UNED, UTN, and TEC); they hold a master’s degree, and their experience in higher education ranged from 5 to 15 years.

Results revealed that professors are mostly satisfied with their professional development of expected teaching competencies. They also showed an ongoing commitment with other academic and research tasks, which is reflected in a given profile created with their own qualities of what a great professional ought to be. Such traits were also compared to the results of similar research studies on professionalism. Finally, the participants mentioned what they do to reinvent their practice, from which factors like academic writing and innovative teaching strategies were pointed out as areas to be improved in their career. To

conclude, most professors reflect their professionalism in their teaching practices and their pursue for improvement of their qualifications and competencies in the field of English language teaching.

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Presenters' Biographies

Olga Chaves-Carballo is a full professor and coordinator of the Accreditation Commission at Universidad Nacional de Costa Rica. She holds a Ph.D in Education with Emphasis in Pedagogical Mediation from the Universidad de la Salle, Costa Rica, a Master's Degree in Teaching English as a Second Language and Educational Administration from Southern Illinois University at Carbondale, Illinois, USA. She's been teaching for more than 34 years from primary school to higher education and she's been a teacher trainer for el Plan Nacional de Inglés CONARE-MEP for 5 years. Her main interests in research for national and international conferences and academic writing for publications are: professional development, teacher development, higher education, global education, teaching skills and accreditation. Her work has been published in the Global Issues in Language Education Newsletter from Japan, Linguagem e Ensino from Brazil and journals from Universidad Nacional, University of Costa Rica, Instituto Tecnológico and Universidad Latinoamericana de Ciencias y Tecnología.

Professor David Rodríguez holds a bachelor's degree and a *licenciatura* degree in Teaching English as a Foreign Language from Universidad Nacional, and Universidad de Costa Rica, accordingly. Also, he holds a master's degree in Second Languages and Cultures with an emphasis in Teaching English as a Foreign Language for Adults from Universidad Nacional. He has worked as an EFL professional at secondary, language schools and university levels for over 10 years, as a teacher and academic language coordinator. He currently works in a high school for Ministerio de Educación, and the Centro de Estudios en Inglés Conversacional, and the Escuela de Literatura y Ciencias del Lenguaje, from Universidad Nacional. His research areas of interests include culture teaching, pedagogical mediation, and professional development, from which has been presented in international conferences and published in journals such as Revista de Lenguas Modernas.