

BRIDGING THE CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES OF EFL TEACHERS' PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT THROUGH DIGITAL COMPETENCIES

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Abstract: This paper presents issues about Indonesian EFL teachers' competencies and their challenges in developing their competencies through professional development (PD). This study was a library research in which the researcher constructed her perspectives on the issues by studying the existing literature on the discussed areas. The previous studies confirmed that EFL teachers are typically challenged by the unavailability of effective professional development that meet their personal and contextual needs. Teachers are then encouraged to engage in professional learning as one of the most flexible professional development programs. Instead of being externally designed, professional learning helps teachers personalize their professional development needs. Therefore, utilizing online instructional resources is at the heart of professional learning. However, several studies confirmed an obvious indication that most teachers lack

digital competencies and need to be professionally assisted to participate in this professional development opportunity. Those studies also confirmed that digital competencies afford teachers essential benefits. As for English teachers, adequate digital skills will enable them to personalize their professional development in a way that is not remote from their classroom needs. In light of this, digital competencies will facilitate teachers' professional learning and extend their professional practices to be more effective and innovative, which will, in turn, improve learning outcomes.

Keywords: English teacher, professional learning, professional learning, digital competence

INTRODUCTION

Education is a complex circle facilitating the process of transferring knowledge, skills, values, and other instructional variables. It involves students, teachers, school environment, and internal or external stake holders. Education put teachers' role as the fundamental resources and serve as the most influential factors determining the quality of the educational practices (Evans, 2011; Trust & Carpenter, 2016). Due to this role, teachers are expected to perform the holistic competences in doing their professional practices. In Indonesian contexts, teachers' required competences are officially regulated in Chapter four article 10 in The Teachers and Lecturers Act No. 14/2005 about Teachers' Academic Qualification, Competence, and Certification. This regulation mandated teachers to be qualified in four key area of competencies, namely Pedagogical, Social, Personal, and Professional Competencies (DEPDIKNAS, 2005).

Desimone, et.al, (2002) stated that the substantial point about teachers' pedagogical competencies as their ability to understand and situating the diversity of the students' background, needs, potencies, characteristics, cognitive development, and personalities. Furthermore, Dayoub & Bashiruddin (2012) also stated that teachers are expected to put those knowledges into practices, in which they have to be able to design their classrooms instructions which can facilitate students' range of needs. Studies on the implementation of English Language Teaching (ELT) in Indonesian context reported that teaching English in Indonesia is extremely challenging (Utami, et.al., 2017; Yuwono & Harbon, 2011). In East Indonesian context, for instance, Su, et.al (2020) reported that the challenges are primarily deal with the diversity of students' sociolinguistics background and minimum access to the appropriate and contextual learning resources. In light of this, teachers' pedagogical competence is strongly needed. As proposed by Guskey (1995), this competence will reflect teachers' ability to facilitate those diversity through appropriate and contextual classrooms instructions.

In terms of professional competences, O'Brien, J., & Jones (2014) claimed that professional teacher is one who have a broad knowledge and understanding about the subject matter and have ability to put them into practices. English as Foreign Language (EFL) teaching, required teachers' comprehensive understanding about English language skills, phonology, pronunciation, vocabulary, and other linguistics aspects (Yuwono & Harbon, 2011). They are also expected to have adequate knowledge about language teaching and learning strategies and a range of approaches they can apply in their language classrooms.

As an educator, teachers are also expected to perform personal competences which basically reflected though their individual characteristics, personality, attitudes, and behavior (Utami, 2019). This competence is strongly needed, since teachers also play their function as the role model from whom the students

can learn about values of integrity, discipline, morality and social norms, and other values students need to support their own personality growth (Evans, 2009). In this instance, teachers' personality is expected can inspire and raise the positive impacts among the students. In many EFL classrooms, teachers have been considered as the main learning resources from where the students can learn about language and beliefs about foreign language learning. English teachers are then expected to be able to raise students' passions and motivation in learning English.

Additionally, Evans (2009) also confirmed that teachers are also required to perform social competencies which are indicated through their ability in building good communication and relationship with the students, colleges, and overall school communities. Social competences will support teachers in managing effective interaction with students particularly in dealing with the diversity of students' difficulties in learning (Villegas, 2003). In EFL classrooms, teachers' social competencies are reflected through their ability to perform a respectful attitude toward the students' strength and weaknesses in mastering language skills and other language instruction managed in the classrooms.

Those competences reflect teachers' ability in dealing with the complexity of educational practices. In this case, teachers are not only expected to be competent in transferring knowledge or mastering the curriculum and a range of teaching strategies but also being competent in transferring values through their social representation and personalities (Mustafa, 2013; Umiyati, 2017). Teaching and educating are then highlighted as the primary responsibilities of professional teachers. These two responsibilities are demonstrated by their ability to influence, guide, and direct their students as well as abilities to assess their students' achievement based on the educational standard. To be a teacher is, therefore, not an easy task to do, and that teachers are always attempted to

improve their competences through various of Teachers Professional Development (TPD) programs.

THE CHALLENGES OF PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT AMONG INDONESIAN EFL TEACHERS

Education runs as a dynamic circle that require teachers to be adaptable individuals who can bring change and innovation into their classrooms. Teachers Professional Development is needed to facilitate teachers' professional growth in those four areas (Solomon & Tresman, 1999). The existing literature discussing Teachers Professional Development (TPD) typically presented the importance of TPD for teachers' professional growth and its implication to the overall educational quality. TPD helps teachers to improve their professional practices through a range of activities. Those activities can be managed as course training, peer coaching, action research, or simply through attending variety of seminars or workshops presenting topics of ELT.

However, Yuwono & Harbon (2010) reported a critical issue regarding English teachers' engagement in professional development programs. She confirmed that, not all English teachers are given chances to engage in those programs. Moreover, Cahyono (2008) claimed the TPD programs offered for English teachers are mostly out of teachers' classrooms contexts and ineffective in supporting teachers overcoming their actual classroom problems and difficulties. This phenomenon is typically caused by the top-down model of TPD formally designed by external providers or stakeholders (Stevenson et.al., 2016) in which teachers are insisted to involve instead of being voluntarily engaged (Evans, et.al., 2009; Opfer & Pedder, 2011).

Several other studies also reported that majority of TPD programs offered to English teachers are designed as the transmission model, in which teachers are involved as the passive participants who are considered "deficient and in need of fixing"

(Ying, 2012). Knowledge, skills, or information presented to teachers through seminars, workshops, or course training are considered fails to effective (Cahyono, 2008; Trust, et. al, 2016). Consequently, the ideas of professional development are failed to achieve and do not significantly resulted on the improvement of their professional practices, not to mention students learning outcomes.

In responding to this, teachers are challenged to seek for a more effective professional development strategy. As proposed by numerous studies in ELT, social networking, the countless digital information, and the diversity of digital applications and other artificial intelligence technologies have brought significant impacts on the current trends of English Language Teaching (ELT). Integrating technologies into English classrooms afforded the unlimited opportunities for both teachers and students to engage with the target language (Li, 2012). The use of Podcast to teach listening, for instance, is believed, can take the English students to the numerous authentic materials as the effective pathways to connect with native speakers and enable them to easily improve their English proficiency (Adnan, 2013; Chan & Lena, 2014). In terms of professional development, technology is highly beneficial in a way it transforms how teach and extend their students' opportunity to acquire the expected knowledge or language skills.

However, the development of technology in learning is not necessarily balanced with the competence of teachers in utilizing technology in learning. Many studies reported the fact that there are still the high percentage of teachers who lack of digital competences and do not have adequate skills in integrating technology into curriculum or their classroom instructions (Champa, et.al., 2019; Hu & Garimella, 2014). In national setting, for instances, a survey on mapping the implementation of digital learning in Indonesia conducted by UNICEF reported that until 2020, 67% of Indonesian teachers are still confirmed to lack of digital knowledge and skills,

characterized by their inability to apply and integrate technological tools into their teaching instruction and the curriculum (UNICEF, 2020).

Considering this innovative trend in English language teaching environments, Teachers Professional Development (TPD) programs offered to English teachers are supposed to help teachers improving another necessary competence as so-called *digital competence*. The facts that there are still big number of teachers who lack of ability in integrating their language instructions with technology is supposed to be a critical reason for government, schools, related stake holders, and teachers themselves to engage in TD programs that will support their digital competencies growth.

Professional Learning and Opportunities for Teachers' Professional Growth

As aforementioned, English teachers are expected to maintain their professional growth through their engagement in sets of TPD programs. However, instead of TPD, in their investigation toward EFL teachers' preferences of their professional development strategies, Utami & Prestridge (2018) elaborated the concept of *professional learning* as a more effective way teachers can apply to improve their competencies. They argue that professional learning is more effective than the traditional concept of TPD since it raises from the teacher's personal needs and motivation to improve their competence as a professional English teacher.

In line with this, Nilsson (2012), also claimed that there is a significant difference between the terms "professional development" and "professional learning". O'Brien & Jones (2014) also argued that, the differences between the two concepts particularly deal with the motivation behind the practices. They stated that the concept of professional development is the top-down model and does not particularly meet teachers' actual contexts and

needs. On the other hand, the concept of professional learning is a bottom-up model which mainly managed as a self-directed professional development model and raised from the teacher's inner motivation to improve their professional practices (Loughran, 2010; Nilsson, 2012; O'Brien & Jones, 2014; Stevenson, et al., 2016).

Futhermore, Utami & Prestridge (2018) confirmed that the basic distinction between these terms is on the integration of digital technologies in its implementation. They claimed that, the advancement of digital technologies and information make professional learning is possible to manage since teachers can independently access the knowledge, skills, and millions of relevant information they need from the internet. In this instance, there are numerous applications, platforms, or websites that provides online professional learning courses or instructional materials teachers can quickly access based on their actual and contextual needs (Aubusson, Schuck & Burden, 2009; Hsiao, et.al, 2013; Loughran, 2010; Stevenson, et al., 2016). The concept of professional learning makes possibilities for teachers to play active roles in determining what they need to learn, how should they design their curriculum, what resources they need, or what teaching strategies they can learn from the process (Ambler 2016; Beltran & Percy, 2014; Campana, 2014).

Nevertheless, the need of *professional learning* has brought English teachers into another professional challenge. It reflects that, current English teachers should not only require the pedagogical, professional, social, or personal competences. Since professional learning engage teachers with digital technological issues, teachers also need to expand their competencies with *digital competencies*. Having adequate digital skills is the most important thing teachers need to consider to engage in more effective professional development strategies. It is the fundamental requirement teachers

have to deal with in developing their professional practices within the rapid changing and the transformation of digital technologies.

Digital Competence for EFL Teachers' Professional Development

The rapid transformation of digital technology provides the English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers with an excellent opportunity to expand the range of their professional practices as well as their individual competences. Fortunately, recent studies in ELT also reported that the use of digital technologies in teaching EFL has brought positive impacts on the students' motivation for learning English, which in turn results in the improvement of their English proficiency (Khoshima & Khazayi, 2017; Nochua, 2012). These findings highlight that, both EFL teachers and students can utilize technology to facilitate their needs in teaching and learning English.

Nonetheless, Hadiananto et al. (2013) claimed that teachers' attitudes, motivation, and digital skills are considered as the most influential factors contributing to the long-term success the digital transformation in EFL classrooms. It is to say that teachers will make no use of this excellent opportunity if they do not have adequate competencies in utilizing those technological tools. Therefore, EFL teachers are required to extend their professional competences with digital competencies.

In ELT practices, digital technology has been considered as the most effective shortcut for teachers to expose their students to a rich, authentic, and innovative English environment (Chan & Lena, 2014). However, teachers need digital competencies in learning to select and locate the appropriate resources among the countless English learning websites or applications available on the internet. For instance, teachers can learn how to utilize digital podcasts or videos to teach speaking and listening. As proposed by some studies, the use of podcasts and English videos are believed to

expose teachers to a wide range of authentic materials that can immediately connect them with native speakers and any relevant information they need to know about the target language (Adnan, 2013; Chan & Lena, 2014; Li, 2012).

These finding highlighted that, teachers' digital competencies will facilitate the development of their pedagogical and professional competences. In this instance, teachers can learn to help their students to personalize their learning based on their levels of English proficiency. Teachers can also learn to design the appropriate classroom instructions, select the best material and resources that can promote a more effective, enjoyable, and resourceful learning experiences for their students (Kennedy, 2016; Liberman & Miller, 2014). In terms of professional competences, digital technology definitely offers opportunities for EFL teachers to acquire more knowledge, skills, vocabulary, and broader linguistic inputs to enhance professional competences.

It must be underlined that students' knowledge of digital technologies does not always correspond to their understanding of their purpose as learning tools. The wide range of English-learning applications, websites, software, and platforms accessible on the internet may provide numerous benefits for language acquisition. However, most platforms only provide instructional tools and materials without any necessary guidelines on how they can facilitate the demands of the existing curriculum and learning objectives. In light of this, teachers' digital competencies are required.

These competencies highlighted teachers' knowledge and skills in determining the appropriate digital resources and planning an effective instructional model to meet the curriculum requirements, learning goals, and other instructional needs (Ertmer et al., 2012). In line with this, Gisbert & Lázaro (2015) asserted that teachers' digital competencies are evidenced by their abilities,

beliefs, and pedagogical knowledge regarding integrating technology into their professional practices. By providing relevant learning resources, utilizing the appropriate digital applications, and encouraging student engagement through practical learning approaches, digital competence will aid teachers in fostering successful language instruction.

Furthermore, digital competence reflects teachers' beliefs that technology is just an assisting tool to support language teaching instead of its target. Krumisyk (2011) argued that students' better learning outcomes are the heart of a teacher's digital competence. These learning outcomes involve the development of both language proficiency and personal skills, such as critical thinking, collaboration, creativity, communication, and problem-solving skills. In line with this, UNESCO (2011) has specifically defined teachers' digital competence as the ability to raise students' life skills through the use of digital technology, with an emphasis on the values of collaboration, creativity, and problem-solving. At this level, learning should indeed be designed to generate digitally adaptive individuals who can grow and survive in the uncertainty of current society. Therefore, besides the purposeful curriculum packaging, teachers' digital competence is undoubtedly considered.

These ideas confirm the urgency of EFL teachers' digital competence in integrating technologies into language instruction. They strongly highlighted that teachers could perform their professional responsibilities with adequate digital competence for two fundamental purposes. These two purposes deal with teachers' abilities to utilize digital technologies for rich, authentic, and influential language instruction and with the ability to transform the students' knowledge, skills, values, and attitudes in preparing for their future within this digital society through the integration of digital technologies into language teaching.

CONCLUSION

Teachers' professional growth are still broadly considered as the critical issues in Indonesian educational context. In this case, Majority of teachers are still lack of involvement in effective professional development strategies that are not particularly meet their actual and contextual needs. Thus, teachers are suggested to manage a self-directed professional development strategy that will enable them to personalize their learning to meet their classrooms contexts as well as their students' actual needs. Teachers are then suggested to raise their digital skills and competences. For English teachers, being digitally literate will bring significant impacts to their professional practices, especially, to improve their students' learning outcomes. EFL teachers' digital competencies will also pedagogically, professionally, socially, and personally promote their competences as English teachers.

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