



## **FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSION METHOD FOR THE PURPOSE OF CONTINUOUS PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT OF ORDINARY LEVEL LITERATURE TEACHERS IN SRI LANKA**

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### **INTRODUCTION**

This concept paper is written based on some themes related to opportunities on professional development that emerged in a larger study, which investigated perspectives of Sri Lankan state sector teachers of Ordinary Level English literature towards the use of Teachers' Resource Book (2015). In this qualitative study, focus group method was used and apart from contributing to the discussion guided by the moderator, the participants discussed various aspects related to teaching literature. While analysing the data, it was observed that these discussion forums could support teacher education on the target subject. Therefore, using this concept paper, it is attempted to point out the existing needs for continuous professional development (CPD, henceforth) among Sri Lankan state sector teachers and to suggest focus group discussions (FGD, henceforth) as a method that could be used to meet Ordinary Level English Literature teachers' CPD needs.

### **Need for continuous professional development in teachers**

In Sri Lanka, teacher education takes place at two levels: pre service teacher education at institutional or university level and CPD while teachers are in the service (Bandara, 2018). However, pertinent research reports on CPD in Sri Lanka point out several areas in CPD that needs attention, thus, suggestive of systematic improvement and novel and cost effective ways to meet the high demands of CPD. For example, a study published by Asian Development Bank (2017) points out, although teachers are trained in state and private sector pre-service training institutions and universities in Sri Lanka, their lack of subject knowledge has created a demand for a consistent subject-based in-service and CPD training (p.29). Furthermore, the same study mentions that the existing typical "Cascade Model, whereby a master trainer is trained, who then trains other officers, who then train others, who finally train the teachers" (p.167) has raised questions among teachers whether the quality of such programmes could be diluted along the line (ADB, 2017). To add to that, Bandara (2018), in a research found that principals were not aware of the available CPDs and due to the lack of proper policy documents, teacher professional development takes place in a haphazard manner at individual school levels, which reduced the uniformity of CPD.

Sethunge et al (2014) in a study on Professional Development of Teachers and Teacher Educators in Sri Lanka points out the need of further strengthening school based teacher development programmes, so that these can establish congruence between the needs of the schools and training received by teachers. Furthermore, in a study on the teacher motivation and job satisfaction in three districts in Northern Sri Lanka, Mangaleswarasharma (2017) found that teachers believed that participating in the in-service professional development programmes and learning communities as a way of personal development, showing that teachers themselves also demonstrated an interest towards CPD. Furthermore, Dundar et al (2017) suggest that school-based teacher development in Sri Lanka could be improved by "demonstration lessons, peer coaching, school based monitoring and assessment, individual consultations, visits to classrooms in other schools, and regular group teacher meetings" (p.95). Hence, the pertinent literature suggests that there is a vacuum to be filled in the CPD in Sri Lankan schools.



## Focus group discussions as a method of CPD

Several research methodology books and a number of previous research studies that have used focus group discussions as a data collection method, point out the versatility of FDGs in creating awareness and educating the participants in research. For example, Cavey (1998), in a case study based on an observation during FGD conducted to facilitate to discuss the problems teachers have, says FDGs can be a highly resourceful way of data collection, which “allows new kinds of ideas to emerge other than the pre-designed structured topics” (p.77). She further points out that unlike in other research methods where participants rarely get to receive the results, FDGs immediately provides information on the outcomes of the discussions (p.77). Further, Patton (2002) in his research methodology book says “FGD tend to be enjoyable to participants drawing on human tendencies as social animals” (p. 386), pointing out that this method could be an interesting way for the teachers to share information.

Researchers are also positive about the opportunities for the experts to intervene in knowledge sharing during FDGs. According to Powell & Single (1996), using FGD allows the researchers to use their existing knowledge also invested on a topic area. They also mention that FGD is beneficial for the participants as well as the “the interactional, synergistic nature of the focus group allows participants to clarify or expand upon their contributions to the discussion in the light of points raised by other participants” (p.500). Hence, it is observable that previous literature also supports the possibility of using FDGs in information sharing among teachers in the same field.

The following research questions have been used to guide the study.

1. Which types of information that could enable teacher learning on the content of the syllabus?
2. Which types of information that contributed for effective teacher practices?
3. Which type of information that allows teachers to find solutions to classroom issues?

## METHODOLOGY

This paper has attempted to re-visit a set of transcribed FGD data to support the concept of using focus group discussions as a professional development strategy. The data set consisted of transcriptions of two FDGs, which were held with the participation of ten teachers of Appreciation of English Literary Texts (GCE OL – Local syllabus) from Colombo district. The sample of teachers were a purposive one and two of them were In-service Advisors for the subject and other participants represented different teaching contexts such as full-time state sector teaching, private sector school teaching and private teaching institutes. The ten participants were separated into two groups depending on their experience and the teaching context. They participated in two focus group discussions, guided by a focus group discussion guide. The discussions took place in a pre-agreed location that was convenient for all the participants.

In order to collect the qualitative data for the larger study, the researcher used “content- oriented focus group discussions”, a discussion directed to elicit useful content on a particular topic of interest (Morgan, 2012, p.163). Powell and Single (1996), elaborating on the outcome of focus group discussions, state that “group of individuals selected and assembled by researchers to discuss and comment on, from personal experience, the topic that is the subject of the research” (p.499). Powell and Single (1996) further mentions that FDGs are devised “separately to explore complex phenomena not amenable to quantitative research” (p.500).



The transcribed focus group discussion data scripts were analysed typologically (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2007) attempting to find instances where the discussion could contribute towards CPD. Initially, codes that were related to teacher education were marked and secondly, themes were generated keeping the similar codes together. For both coding and creating themes, soft copies of FGD transcriptions were used in the MS Word Package and the review option was used to code. Codes were then sorted, looking for similarities in the view of identifying possible themes. The emerged themes will be discussed under the topic Results and Discussion.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

During the discussions, participants contributed towards the topics raised by the moderator about their use of Teachers' Guide and their perspectives towards it. However, teachers also discussed and shared information about various topics related to teaching OL English literature and practical situations they experienced in their own teaching contexts. While analysing the FGD transcriptions, the researcher found several codes related to teacher education that could fit in under the following themes.

1. Information on prescribed texts
2. Information on various practices teachers can use to overcome issues
3. Information about new information sources and additional reading material / information sources
4. Sharing knowledge on new teaching methods
5. Activities suitable for varied learners
6. Practical issues in the classroom and methods to overcome them
7. Time management strategies
8. To clear doubts about content in the syllabus
9. Sharing of examination related information
10. Strategies to prepare students for final examination
11. Learner differences related to gender, social background and religion

While considering the types of information teachers shared, participants in unison agreed at the end of the discussions that the discussions were helpful and was able discuss matters that they have not been able to raise due to unavailability of opportunities. This specifically was addressed due to the availability of the In Service Advisors as participants. Hence, these discussions emerged as "regular group teacher meeting" and a "peer coaching" as suggested appropriate by Dundar et al (2017) towards CPD in Sri Lankan context.

Although the FGDs in this study took place in a physical meeting context, the nature of FGDs also would fit as virtual meeting where participants could be trained in their own working spaces, which would be more cost effective, and especially would suit the present context where education has taken a drastic transition towards virtual classrooms. Moreover, since FGD allows teachers to interact directly with different people in the same field, the possible quality dilution in the cascade method suggested by the Asian Development Bank report (2017) could be addressed.

## CONCLUSIONS/ RECOMMENDATIONS

This concept paper attempts to contribute to the possible ways that could be used towards CPD in Sri Lankan contexts, particularly in the field of teaching Ordinary Level English Literature. As previous research on CPD in Sri Lanka suggest, there is an obvious need to implement CPD programmes among teachers. Thus, as the findings of this study suggests, FGD would be an effective CPD method that could overcome some of the problems with the



existing CPD programmes and also a method that could be used in the present virtual classroom context.

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