

# TEFL GREECE

## Teacher development - what, why and how.

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### INTRODUCTION

Teacher development appears to be an area of ELT management that in Greece is either neglected or misunderstood. Few schools have programmes of development, and many of those that do are flawed and thus counterproductive. A considered approach, however, will increase productivity and profit, and is something that can be applied to even the smallest language school.

In a recent article in IATEFL Issues, Adrian Underhill defines teacher development thus:

Teacher Development is the process of becoming the best teacher one is able to be, a process that can be started but never finished". (1999:17)

There are two main types of teacher development (TD):-

TD that is undertaken voluntarily by the teacher, in the teachers own time, with the teacher's own money, mainly because the teacher is interested in learning new things which may help them become a better teacher.

TD that is undertaken at the behest of the employer, on the employer's time, with the employer's money, mainly because the employer is interested in having their teachers learn new things which will help them become better teachers.

## THE STORY SO FAR

Here in Greece, the model for TD is usually the first. Most teachers pay for their own development. Here is a typical (hypothetical) example:-

G worked at the same language school for the last five years, teaching a broad range of classes. Because she particularly enjoys working with young learners she followed an MA in Teaching English to Young Learners. The course cost a lot of money, and while she started the course mainly out of personal interest, she thinks she acquired skills and knowledge which deserve to be rewarded in some way. The language school felt they could not afford to offer her promotion or pay her more. G has now gone to work for one of the main rivals.

Clearly in this example, G's ex-employer obtained no benefit whatsoever from her interest in teaching. Indeed TD would appear to be responsible for the language school losing an experienced teacher to the competition.

However the real responsibility lies with the employer. When a teacher acquires new knowledge it is only natural that they want to put it into practice. The employer could have seen the situation as an opportunity. They did not have many young learners, but they had someone with specialist knowledge in the area. They could have given G a position of responsibility and worked with her to produce and market a range of YL courses, giving themselves an edge over the competition.

One of the main arguments that managers put forward for not paying for TD, is that the person who develops may take their newly acquired skills elsewhere, and that the company will thus be subsidising their competitors. This is an extremely short sighted point of view, since it is certain that an employee who undertakes TD at their own cost, will want to work for an organisation that

acknowledges and rewards their effort.

In other words, an organisation that fails to take the TD needs of their employees seriously is certain to lose their best teachers.

However, in some cases language schools do provide opportunities for TD. Here is another case:-

F worked at a language school for many years. At the beginning of the new school year the teachers were told that the language school had organised a part time training course for their staff of ten teachers, provided by a local training company and taking place on alternate Sunday mornings. F found the course rather general and uninteresting and resented having to work on a Sunday. However it was made clear to F that attendance at the sessions was obligatory. F subsequently found a job elsewhere.

This example highlights the problems caused by good intentions when they are not combined with a well thought out programme. 10 teachers are likely to have widely differing teaching experiences and equally differing interests and, but how can these different interests be satisfied by a single all-purpose programme of TD? If the programme does not meet these needs then how much enthusiasm would there be for a single Sunday morning session, let alone twenty? TD has to reflect the individual's desires, otherwise it is merely a training course.

Bringing in outside expertise should be something of a last resort. Using the experience and knowledge of staff makes it clear that these qualities are valued, and gives the people a sense of ownership over their development, whereas in this case the staff are again undervalued.

These examples illustrate the pitfalls of some pretty common approaches to staff development. How can these be avoided? The most important thing is to begin with a clear idea of what staff development is for. When that is clear, it is relatively easy to design programmes that will work.

## ORGANIZING TEACHER DEVELOPMENT

Torrington and Hall (1987:395) make the point that TD is necessary to deal with current strategic needs and also meet unidentified future needs. In other words a language school should undertake TD not just to deal with current plans and policies such as designing and implementing a new suite of courses, but also to be able to respond to future changes in the market. They make the point that the future will certainly not be the same as the present, and the skills required will also be different. Computer training five years ago might have seemed of little relevance to language learning. Now those skills are highly desirable.

White et al (1991:67) make the important point that TD should be organised. Someone should have overall responsibility for TD and should have a budget. White et al put forward a figure of 2% of annual turnover as being typical in the commercial world.

They also make the important point that TD applies to all staff - teachers are not the only people with development needs and aspirations. All staff, without exception should have the opportunity for TD.

We need to start from the premise that all our staff have many talents and skills - that is why we have chosen them to work for us. What we want to do is help them identify areas where they could develop their existing skills or acquire new skills. Having done this we need to discuss which skills the teacher wants to work on and help organise a programme of action that will contribute to this. All of this may sound a little too warm and cuddly to be sound management. However a teacher that feels that they are developing has a sense of direction and purpose and the motivation to perform far beyond the minimum. The better the skills of the teacher, the better the results in the classroom. A workforce that has additional skills is one that offers greater flexibility which means that the school will be able to develop into new markets. All of these are of clear financial benefit to the school.

So what form should TD take? Well there are many possible forms but some factors are essential.

It should be on-going. TD is a continuous process. Schools should make a commitment to an open-ended view of TD.

It should be negotiated. TD cannot be imposed from above. Management should act as a facilitator and should be aware that the individuals TD needs may be somewhat different from those identified by management.

A simple TD framework could work as follows:

- Each employee considers possible TD goals for the next year/two years/... A short questionnaire such as that suggested by Impey and Underhill (1994:68) can help crystallise this.
- The DOS considers possible TD goals for each employee on the basis of their perceived strengths and weaknesses, planned marketing initiatives, etc.
- The DOS meets with each staff member for an Annual TD interview at which they discuss and formulate a TD plan. DOS acts as facilitator - suggesting, encouraging, etc. White et al.(1991:79), in a different context, suggest that SWOP, Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Problems can form a useful basis for discussion. Modifying this slightly I would suggest that Strengths and Weaknesses should look backward - how has the school / teacher performed up to now. Opportunities and Problems should focus on the future - what are the school's plans and what obstacles are there to their success - and how the teacher can make the most of these. At the end of each interview there should be a concrete plan with clear outcomes.
- The various TD plans are carried out.
- Feedback - the DOS and employee meet to assess the success of the TD.
- Feedback - the DOS and management evaluate the success of the TD programme as a whole. How can it be improved?
- The process begins again.

One important area that is missing from this list, are the regular group development sessions. The purpose of these is to enable employees to pass on the benefits of their TD to their colleagues.

Impey and Underhill (1994:72) make the point that TD activities can take a multitude of forms. These include:-

- Attending or presenting at conferences and reporting to colleagues.
- Attending or leading in-house presentations and seminars.
- Attending external training workshops and dissemination of content to colleagues.
- Developing personal IT skills - for example learning to use database programmes.
- Developing CALL skills - for example learning to use Gapmaster and giving feedback to colleagues.
- Materials development - developing teaching materials for use as supplementary material or for self access.
- Following a course leading to a qualification - for example a DELTA or Med. course.
- Mentoring - acting as a mentor to new teachers or teachers taking on a new role.
- Peer observation. - regularly observing classes of a colleague (and vice versa) with feedback/discussion.
- Reading an ELT book and demonstrating a number of activities to colleagues.
- Review ELT coursebooks and writing an evaluation report.
- Taking on a position of responsibility.
- Test review - looking at progress tests / final examinations and improving test items.
- Undertaking a class project - for example setting up a class website or e-mail exchange.
- Writing an article for an ELT magazine or website.

Obviously the list of possible activities is endless. But it is important that all TD activities should be seen equally. The TD needs of different employees will be different, and the best methods of fulfilling these will be different too. Just as our students have different learning styles, so too do employees.

## CONCLUSION

Obviously a programme of TD will have a financial cost. Courses and workshops cost money, and clearly these costs should be met by the school. A number of hours of TD will have to be set aside each week, hours which again should be paid by the school. However, the cost of having a TD programme is small in comparison to the gains which the school can make in terms of flexibility and productivity. A school that has a motivated and committed staff who continually refine existing skills and develop new ones, is a school that will initiate change and be able to maintain a position as a market leader. A school with a high staff turnover that has to hire in teachers with new skills is a school that can merely respond to change, and is one that is likely to have difficulties keeping up with the changing ELT market.

Peter Senge, the main proponent of the learning organisation says:

The organizations that will truly excel in the future will be the organizations that discover how to tap people's commitment and capacity to learn at **all** levels in an organisation." (1990:4)

Nearly ten years later in an extremely competitive market, it is perhaps time that language schools started to take TD to heart.

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