

## Professional Development (PD) for ESL Teachers' Knowledge Orientation: An Empirical Study

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**ABSTRACT:** PD initiatives have a broader implication for English as Second Language (ESL) teachers at the Sri Lanka university sector to improve their professional growth and students' performance. A qualitative case study was undertaken with ten ESL teachers of a government university of Sri Lanka to identify the implications of PD for the acquisition and improvement of skills and expertise for their improved practice. The study used semi-structured interviews as the research instrument, and Thematic Analysis for recognizing, analyzing and interpreting of data. The findings indicate three vital implications of PD that enable teachers to develop a stronger knowledge base in ESL: up skilling knowledge and expertise, disseminating knowledge through research, and improving teaching skills. Although both sponsored and independent PD activities are beneficial in providing meaningful learning opportunities to heighten teachers' knowledge base, activities relevant, interesting and practitioner-centered can only maximize teacher engagement and achieve these outcomes. To which extent practitioners' perceptions are in line with managerialist or democratic professionalism is mostly determined by the nature of knowledge expected to be achieved by them. The findings of this study are significant to PD providers and policy makers for designing and delivering of PD programs in ESL to gain optimum outcomes through effective PD opportunities.

**KEY WORDS:** knowledge, perceptions; professional development; managerialism; democratic; university

### I. INTRODUCTION

Graduates who have higher levels of English language skills are mostly capable of securing job opportunities in the Sri Lankan employment market (Perera & Canagarajah, 2010; Ponnampereuma & Nanayakkara, 2018; Samrajya, 2008), in particular, such graduates have higher demand in the private sector thus, receive better salary than those who work in the government sector (World Bank, 2009). If this is the case, the key responsibility of the ESL teachers in the Sri Lankan universities is to improve their students' English language competence. However, many ESL practitioners in the university system are unable to address this need effectively (Gajadeera, 2006; Ranasinghe & Ranasinghe, 2012) for two main reasons. First, many teachers' need to acquire expertise in pedagogical content knowledge and language learning techniques (Liyanage, 2010; Navaz, 2012). For the reason that, neither a postgraduate diploma nor a professional degree in education is compulsory for recruiting as ESL teachers in the university sector (National Education Commission, 2016). Secondly, as many ESL practitioners in the universities have Arts and Humanities backgrounds and their content knowledge in other disciplines is inadequate (Abeywickrama, 2019). This is great a deterrent and a challenge for teachers to enrich the English skills needed for their students' academic subjects. Notably, through the provision of PD, teachers can successfully fill the gaps in their knowledge and practice. Specially, focussed PD for ESL practitioners is "a very vital aspect in managing curriculum development, innovation" (Wijeskera, 2012, p. 19) and their classroom practices (Guskey, 2003; Merkt, 2017; Tinoca & Valente, 2015). Evidence in the literature also demonstrates the implications of teacher PD for improving students' learning and performance (Coldwell, 2017; Diaz-Maggioli, 2004; Mohan, Lingam, & Chand, 2017; Mushayikwa & Lubben, 2009; Saberi & Sahragard, 2019; Sixel, 2013; Tan, Chang, & Teng, 2015; Villegas-Reimers, 2003).

Given this background, the government and foreign agencies seriously consider how to enrich the practices of ESL teachers in the Sri Lankan university sector through PD initiatives (Perera & Canagarajah, 2010). Although the implication of PD for ESL teachers' professional growth and classroom teaching is increasingly being discussed at various educational and political forums in Sri Lanka there seems to be inconsistencies in policy (Gunawardhane, 2018), relevance and contribution in the available PD programs (Gajadeera, 2006). More, specifically, the government and foreign agencies cannot appropriately cater for ESL teachers' needs as they have no adequate understanding of why they should engage productively in PD

activities. In spite of this, policy makers and governing institutions continuously request ESL practitioners to heighten their pedagogical knowledge and skills via the existing PD activities for improved teaching and learning (Abeywickrama, 2019). This means that ESL teachers mostly engage in PD initiatives to satisfy the requirements in their workplace context or when the management considers attendance to PD is mandatory. Thus, the aim of this study is to gain a comprehensive awareness of ESL teachers' requirements to attend PD so as to identify the implications of PD for the acquisition and improvement of skills and expertise for their improved practice. This may finally lead PD facilitators, policy designers and institutions to offer meaningful PD activities, and yield better outcomes from the existing PD opportunities.

### Theoretical framework

Researchers are increasingly applying the theory of constructivism to their research in education to indicate the potential of constructivist principles to enable teachers' learning through PD (Abdal-Haqq, 1998; Cárdenas, González, & Álvarez, 2010). This study used Jean Piaget's (1896-1980) psychological constructivism and Lev Vygotsky's (1896-1934) social constructivism to indicate the effectiveness of PD activities to create new knowledge.

Psychological constructivism works as learning or "sense-making" theory that shows how the nature of knowledge and human beings capability change them into "empowered learners" (Cannella & Reiff, 1994, p. 28) with the support of their prior knowledge and understanding (Black & Ammon, 1992; Cannella & Reiff, 1994; Richardson, 1997). Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), on the other hand, operates as a socio-cultural theory and encourages "situated learning" (Shirazi, Bagheri, Sadighi, & Yarmohammadi, 2013, p. 182). This theory focuses on "interactive systems that are larger than the behavior and cognitive processes of an individual agent" (Greeno, 1998, pp. 5-6). This means that learning always takes place within the context in response to the situation where it occurs (Putnam & Borko, 2000). Therefore, new knowledge can be produced "through nurturing teachers" social interaction that supports them to move towards ZPD (Shirazi et al., 2013, p. 182) after "a successive series of reflection and application within a teacher's ZPD" (Mak, 2010, p. 399).

Constructivism always encourages activities that are linked with active engagement (Abdal-Haqq, 1998), inquiry, reflection (Cárdenas et al., 2010; Núñez Pardo & Téllez Téllez, 2015) and collaboration (Cornu & Ewing, 2008). These initiatives provide teachers the opportunities to develop as professionals and adult learners (Abdal-Haqq, 1996), and obtain better understanding through internalization (Abdal-Haqq, 1998, p. 1). This means that the theory of constructivism can effectively be applied to research to indicate the power of constructivist principles to heighten teacher learning and efficacy through focused PD activities (Abdal-Haqq, 1998; Cárdenas et al., 2010).

### Teacher development

Teacher development refers to what teachers' gain in terms of their overall growth and their "understanding of teaching and of themselves as teachers" and mostly focuses on instilling lifelong learning in practitioners' continuum of learning (Richards & Farrell, 2005, p. 4). Thus, development largely operates as a bottom-up approach and reflectively reviews a teacher's "diverse measures of practice" (Richards & Farrell, 2005, p. 4). As Padwad and Dixit (2011) argue, the aim of this planned process is to enrich teachers' "personal and professional qualities, and their knowledge, skills and practices" (p. 13) for their individual empowerment and supporting their institutional and learner needs (Chaves & Guapacha, 2016). Although it is claimed that practitioners are responsible for their own development by undertaking independent PD activities (Borg, 2014; Wallace, 1991) even sponsored PD can broadly support teachers' continuous development (Bozat, Bozat, & Hursen, 2013).

Teacher development has connection with three type of knowledge: "knowledge-for-practice, knowledge-of-practice, and knowledge-in-practice" (Cochrane-Smith & Lytle, 1999, p. 254). For Cochrane-Smith and Lytle (1999), *knowledge-for-practice* refers to what teachers produce systematically outside their classrooms, for example, "research-based programs, new theories of teaching, learning and assessments" (p. 254), whereas, knowledge produced by teachers by reflectively observing their individual classrooms "alone or with others, in terms of broader issues of social justice, equity and student achievement" (p. 256) is considered *knowledge-of-practice*. *Knowledge-in-practice*, in contrast, concerns what teachers should acquire to address their practice-based needs (Cochrane-Smith & Lytle, 1999). As Day and Sachs (2004) claim, teachers are also capable of producing "*knowledge of self*" via continuous reflection on and assessing their standards, aims, emotions and connections. Notably, Day and Sachs' *knowledge of self* is considerably different from the three knowledge-related concepts of Cochrane-Smith and Lytle (1999) because they have strong association with cognitive knowledge. Even though research validate that teacher cognition has a positive impact on teacher reflection (Gurney, 2015; Tam, 2014) and teacher development (Gurney, 2015), teachers also possess the ability of acquiring knowledge within and outside their classrooms that has no direct connections with their knowledge, principles and thoughts (Abeywickrama, 2019).

As argued by Golombek and Johnson (2007), challenges to practitioners' beliefs and decision-making can deliberately stimulate their self-reflection and interpretation of meaning, and that this phenomenon illustrates the real conflict between these two aspects, and demonstrates the deviation between cognition and practice that occurs in consequence of the demands in the setting where the actual teaching happens (Feryok, 2010). This indicates that teacher cognition perhaps causes teachers' all practices, (Borg, 2003), for instance, teacher's deliberate investigation of their own cognitions and their relationship with classroom teaching build a potential environment for practitioner-centred, self-reflective learning (Golombek & Johnson, 2007). If this is the case, as Avalos (2011) emphasizes, teacher cognition should carefully be considered in determining the content and delivery of PD sessions that can effectively support to heighten teacher efficacy.

As discussed previously, teachers' professional practice is connected to different kinds of knowledge, especially its association with "knowledge of student thinking and learning and knowledge of subject matter" (Mishra & Koehler, 2006, p. 1020) is considerably significant. However, it is difficult to decide the constituents of ideal or required knowledge as it can constantly change (Santoro, Reid, Mayer, & Singh, 2013). As Gurney (2015) argues, practitioners' context of teaching, methods, industry and nature of student population broadly impact in determining their knowledge. For Santoro et al. (2013, p. 123), what comprises teacher knowledge is increasingly widening, as a result, it now includes "developments in information technology, the diversification of student cohorts, the ways in which knowledge is produced and transmitted, as well as pressing and urgent issues about the state of the world's environment." In fact, all these knowledge related perceptions contribute to teacher human capital (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012).

### **Sponsored and independent PD**

Two types of initiatives: independent and sponsored PD, broadly support teachers to enrich their knowledge, skills and expertise (Abeywickrama, 2019). Managerialism always controls sponsored PD activities, decides "professional standards and frames the content and aims" of them (M. Evans & Esch, 2013, p. 137). As Day and Sachs (2004) argue, managerialist principles set corporate goals and standardized criteria in order to evaluate teachers and students' contribution to institutional responsibility. In contrast, independent PD regulated by democratic professionalism situates teachers' needs and values as the primary constituents and encourage them to achieve their goals via practitioner-centred initiatives (Abeywickrama, 2019). The main aims of democratic professionalism are: (a) to promote collaborative practices among all stakeholders in the industry, and (b) to make practitioners understand their responsibility to the entire system of education (Sachs, 2001) and also to the larger community (Day & Sachs, 2004). In contrast, managerialism always encourages industrial needs and values (Bolam, 2000; Deem & Brehony, 2005; Skinner, Leavey, & Rothi, 2019) instead of teacher professional identity (Bloomfield, 2006; Skinner et al., 2019). Conversely, these authors have not disregarded the contribution of managerialism to enhance teacher professional identity (Sachs, 2001).

There is no agreement among researchers of how PD should be offered to practitioners (Tan et al., 2015). As Fischer (2000) underscores, if practitioners can undertake PD activities without any pressure from the management they can effectively achieve the expected learning outcomes and instil the interest for lifelong learning. Others, in contrast, claim that independent PD activities cannot always provide the knowledge and expertise that teachers need to create significant changes in their classroom practices (Morgan, 2010). This validates the significance of sponsored PD for teachers' professional practice thus, institutional involvement in PD activities cannot be marginalized (Bozat et al., 2013; Gurney, Liyanage, & Gharachorloo, 2014). Even though there is "overlapping, inseparable and sometimes uneasy" (Gurney & Liyanage, 2016, p. 1) relationship between the two types of PD activities teachers' preparedness to enrich their classroom practices and achieve their professional growth are the key that determine their engagement in PD activities.

### **Method**

This qualitative investigation utilized case study approach to sustain quality, validity and contribution (Chapelle & Duff, 2003; Patton, 2002). Without examining the phenomena as units, this research explored the case broadly (Ary, Jacobs, Sorensen, & Warker, 2014), and coherently (Patton, 2002, p. 55), in participants' employment context thus, researcher was able to identify the phenomena more insightfully based on their perceptions (Gajadeera, 2006; Denzin & Lincoln as cited in Savenye & Robinson, 2005; Zadrozny, McClure, Lee, & Jo, 2016).

The study comprised ten ESL teachers employed in the Department of English Language Teaching of a government university in Sri Lanka. The investigation employed purposeful sampling method that enabled the inquirer to select information-rich cases to make thorough analyses. Semi-structured interview was the method of data collection and each respondent attended an interview of 40-60 minutes duration. Notably, this instrument is more flexible and consistent than other data collection methods (Burns, 2000; Cohen & Manion, 1994; Hitchcock & Hughes, 1995; Zacharias, 2012). Therefore, semi-structured interviews facilitated the inquirer to

obtain unpredicted answers, stimulate respondents for in-depth views and recognize their explanation for such responses (Ashworth & Lucas, 2000; Cohen & Manion, 1994). Participants were not required minimum qualifications or experience to take part in the study, conversely, the selected group has post-graduate qualifications and included males, females, novice as well as experienced ESL practitioners.

This investigation used Braun and Clarke's (2006) inductive approach of Thematic Analysis (TA) as the tool in order to recognize, analyze and interpret the data. Many researchers in education largely applied TA during the last decade for their studies (Coldwell, 2017; Crowe, Inder, & Porter, 2015; Liyanage & Bartlett, 2010; Skinner et al., 2019; Tuckett, 2005). The following six phrases in TA: (a) familiarizing with data; (b) generating initial codes; (c) searching for themes; (d) reviewing themes; (e) defining and naming themes; and (f) producing the report (see Braun & Clarke, 2006), were largely helpful to recognize and report the significance of PD activities to heighten teachers' knowledge and skills for improved classroom practice.

At the first phrase of TA, the researcher thoroughly read the transcribed interviews to familiarize and internalize data. To his end, each transcription imported into NVivo qualitative data analysis software was re-read to recognize diverse meanings and patterns in data. At the next stage, the chunks of texts connecting to each research question were discovered and clustered them with a code. In this process, the data extracted from each transcription was classified for as many possible patterns and, then the researcher took out the fragmented statements from individual transcript and arranged them together within each code. The study used NVivo qualitative data analysis software to identify the segmented text within each data set by labelling them. As the initial theoretical content emerges here this phrase functions as a vital part of the analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Tuckett, 2005).

In the third stage, the codes produced in the second phrase were grouped into perceptions based on their relationships. Next, the identified conceptions were organized together as emerging themes (Liyanage & Bartlett, 2010). For Braun and Clarke (2006), a theme is always the primary idea of data collected in relation to the research questions and represents some kind of pattern of importance. In this process, the researcher extracted all data connecting to each theme from the participants' interview transcriptions, and linked them first with the specific codes and then with the themes (Crowe et al., 2015).

The fourth stage involves further refinement and reviewing of the developed themes. The researcher characterized all extracts connected to the themes and carefully examined them to make sure that they indicated a consistent pattern and sufficiently showed the "contours data" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 26). This was followed by validating each individual theme in relation to the entire data set to ensure that the perspectives given in data were correctly revealed. In the next phrase, accuracy of each developed theme was examined and then compared across all themes connecting to teachers' knowledge orientation (see Figure 1). Here the themes which were identified by a systematic management of the data changed into a category for analysis (Yukhymenko, Brown, Lawless, Brodowinska, & Mullin, 2014). Writing of the article, the last phrase of TA is based on the previously finalized themes. The following sections of the study will discuss each theme connecting to teacher PD and knowledge orientation with adequate quotations from the participants, thus maintain the validity of the findings.

## Results and discussion

As initiated in the figure given below, participants reported four knowledge-oriented perceptions of PD. In general, all participants reported their views in support of knowledge-oriented perceptions and exposed how PD initiatives can (a) upgrade, revise and re-orient their classroom teaching in keeping with learner needs; and (b) develop effective communication strategies for transmitting knowledge to their learners and to the academic community. Thus, the outcome of PD can enhance the efficacy in teachers' workplace practices and contribute to develop a potential knowledge base in ESL. It is significant to note that, the diverse perspectives of knowledge and expertise that participants revealed are in line with the leading definition of PD (see Alba & Sandberg, 2006; Avalos, 2011; L. Evans, 2008; Zhang, 2015) which also elaborate the implication of knowledge enhancement for teachers' professional practice. As these perceptions constructively contribute to teachers, they were likely to engage in PD to achieve their goals.

### Figure 1- Knowledge-oriented perceptions

#### 1. Upskilling knowledge and expertise

One knowledge-oriented perception placed PD as a way for upskilling knowledge: in this context, the role of PD activities is to work as an agent for incorporating teachers' existing knowledge in constructing new knowledge.

As reported by participants, focussed PD activities facilitate to construct this knowledge and lead them to introduce tangible changes to their classroom practices or change in their behaviour. As participant 1 reflected, “when delivering a lecture or a speech a teacher should integrate the new knowledge and create new ideas. However, in order to do that, teachers need the support of PD” (Lines 243-245). Although the lack of effective PD opportunities has largely hindered constructing new knowledge “once I get the new knowledge, I always bring that knowledge to my classroom and apply them” (Participant 7, Lines 244- 245). For Participant 10, an on-going recursive practice which caused knowledge construction can be encouraged through PD:

It is a process. It supports ESL teachers to gain knowledge, experience and skills. It is a continuous process to enhance knowledge, gain knowledge, enhance knowledge and then gain experience, as well as you know to generate knowledge and skills (Participant 10, Lines 6-8)

Although previous studies illustrate that creation of new knowledge and skills is a process of incorporating the existing knowledge and understanding (Black & Ammon, 1992; Cannella & Reiff, 1994; Jovanova-Mitkovska, 2010; Richardson, 1997; Shirazi et al., 2013), practitioners’ potential and creativeness mostly determine to which extent they can effectively undertake this transformational process (Mate, Brizio, & Tirassa, 2011). Even though researchers argue that specific and accurate parameters need to be fixed in order to recognize teacher’s actual changes, (Gurney, 2015), participants have already noticed significant changes in their class room practices by undertaking PD initiatives, especially, for Cochrane-Smith and Lytle (1999), practitioners’ new methods of teaching, learning and assessing which involve teachers’ knowledge-for-practice can demonstrate their transformation of practice.

This knowledge-oriented perception is important to the key stakeholders of PD who design and deliver PD activities. As PD designers and learners have uneven and structurally non-reciprocal relationship (Wubbels, Brekelmans, den Brok, & van Tartwijk, 2006), PD facilitators are mostly responsible for managing learning situations in a manner in which learners generate knowledge and reach the expected learning outcomes by altering their methods and concepts (Hiebert, Gallimore, & Stigler, 2002; Mate et al., 2011). Until teachers are positioned as the key stakeholders in PD activities and facilitated them to transform their knowledge and practice through meaningful opportunities, they tend to develop misconceptions and dissatisfaction, create undesirable perceptions with regard to the outcomes of PD, and finally indicate less enthusiasm to participate in such activities without institutional pressure.

## II. DISSEMINATION OF KNOWLEDGE

The second knowledge-oriented perception of PD works as a stimulus for promoting teachers’ knowledge dissemination via research. What is being broadly discussed in education reform forums is that the importance of engaging in on-going research and its implication for teachers’ professional practice. Participants’ reflections also indicated their understanding of the need for improving research and critical thinking skills to align with the development in their practice as “teaching is always learning and opportunities to experiment. It means that teacher should be a re-researcher. Particularly in ESL, we can do research in order to generate and disseminate knowledge” (Participant 10, Lines 25-27). Notably, teachers in the early stages of their career reported both positive and negative views for research-oriented PD activities. For Participant 1, for instance, PD was essential to instil the desire for gathering knowledge and expertise required for teachers’ on-going research:

It’s [Research Methodology] a sort of workshop but that was successful. Still, I have the interest to know the new methods of doing research, how to analyse data, and the new technology that we can use to facilitate those things and I still have contact with the resource person. So, I believe after taking part in that activity, it had made me a lifelong learner of the subject. (Participant 1, Lines 263- 267)

Critically, as some participants demonstrated, most research-oriented PD activities’ key focus was to enrich Science based investigations rather than Arts and Humanities, thus the examples, materials, and models used in such sessions were in line with the aim. Particularly, “when they [facilitators] discuss the research questions, especially the analysing part the things are not relevant to the ESL teachers” (Participant 9, Lines 184-185). The divergence between what participants’ actually needed and what they were provided in practice could hinder their engagement, thus may not gain the optimum outcomes from these PD activities. Participants placed action research positively given its importance for teachers’ professional practice, therefore, as revealed by them, this practice should be appropriately established within in the university sector as a powerful means of PD in which teachers can heighten their learner engagement and classroom learning. Participant 10, for example, reported:

It [research] is an on-going process actually, while we are teaching we can engage in, for example we see the common errors that students tend to make, and then we can undertake a study to identify how to overcome those errors and motivate students not to repeat those errors. (Lines 182-185)

In particular, through action research, practitioners have the opportunity to heighten their research-based knowledge and research-related skills, for example, practitioners can constructively change their classroom teaching and learning through critical reflection and collaborative inquiry of their individual practices (Holter & Frabutt, 2012). As such, action research should be embedded as a key component of classroom practices driven by PD (Groundwater-Smith & Dadds, 2004; Hagger & McIntyre, 2000; Puustinen, Sääntti, Koski, & Tammi, 2018). As Lafrenière, Menuz, Hurlimann, and Godard (2013) state, knowledge dissemination is a process in which findings of a study are communicated to a targeted audience through prospective channels to generate a positive impact on acquisition of knowledge, skills, and attitudes. Conversely, as discussed earlier, whether the available PD opportunities satisfactorily support participants' knowledge construction and distribution is a question.

Generally, many teachers have no adequate knowledge and skills as to how research findings are distributed effectively (see Schoenfield, 2009). If this is the case, through PD, teachers need to be provided with the required knowledge, skills (Hine, 2013), and new technologies in a manner they engage in meaningful studies, (Alibakhshi & Dehvari, 2015; Galustyan, Berezhnaya, & Beloshitsky, 2017), nature their interest for research and disseminate the results of their investigations more professionally in the current knowledge-based economy. It is significant to note that the management is attempting to inspire teachers' interest for research through two diverse motives: (a) introducing the module, Research in Higher Education to the Certificate in Teaching for Higher Education (CTHE) for university teachers, and (b) establishing a committee at each university to allocate research grants for university teachers, based on merit. However, optimum outcome from this knowledge-oriented perception of PD can be gained through the re-examination of certain practices at the university system, such as assessing teacher involvement in Research and Development (R&D), in the existing value system in the university sector for increments and promotions.

The other two knowledge oriented perceptions of PD approach knowledge acquisition in a more general fashion. More specifically, these perceptions consider PD a potential platform for teachers to keep informed, upgrade and refresh their knowledge of ESL, and enrich the effectiveness of their classroom teaching.

### III. IMPROVED TEACHING PRACTICE

One of these conceptions situated PD as a way for enhancing practitioners' skills in teaching enabling them for effective knowledge transmission. Previous studies also validate the importance of on-going PD for teachers' knowledge, skills and attitudinal development (Bandara, 2018; Piedrahita, 2007), which may result in intellectual, emotional and social development in their learners (Avalos, 2011; Farooq, 2016; Guskey, 2002; Meissel, Parr, & Timperley, 2016; Sedova, Sedlacek, & Svaricek, 2016). All participants strongly supported this broadly acknowledged conception. Participant 4, for example, reported,

Uh...well it [PD] affects to a great extent. So, when I have completed a PD activity I apply certain concepts for my classroom teaching then I feel that the students engage in a better way. I feel that I teach in a better way. So, therefore PD definitely helps us perform better in the classroom. So, it helps directly enhance the teaching learning process. (Lines 189-192)

As revealed by participants, PD could also broadly support for gaining knowledge of skills necessary for their practice-based needs. Practitioners can identify such needs by critically reflecting their individual classroom teaching (Goh, 2013) in relation to what they believe as effective practice, and this reflective process enabled them to search for essential skills for enhancement and knowledge transmission:

For me, actually, when I see my students and their learning difficulties and their problems, so then that motivates me to learn something new. Because, I always think about my learners and then through their problems and difficulties I always try to find solutions for them. (Participant 7, Lines 148-151)

For Participant 5, teachers can effectively address those needs through job-embedded PD, for the reason that, "although we know the theory we need to get into the authentic. That means into real class room situations where we need these practical skills" (Lines 321- 322). This demonstrates that practical classroom-based PD has a strong link with both practitioner and learner needs (Sixel, 2013), and creates potential opportunities for teachers' learning through practicing, reflecting and reinforcing (Reeves, 2010). Most importantly, this perception also supports practitioners' to develop a high degree of agency in searching for

different PD activities to enrich their self-efficacy (Gurney, 2015) which can finally heighten their classroom teaching and learner engagement (Summers, Davis, & Hoy, 2017). However, whether teachers can effectively follow PD in response to their needs is largely dependent on their capacity for accurately reflecting the impacts of their decisions, and their capability to differentiate and perceive the effects of other external factors on their classroom efficacy (Gurney, 2015). Even though practitioners can manage such issues satisfactorily, this is not always the case. As Edge, Reynolds, O'Toole, and Boylan (2015) argue, teachers' capacity for providing practitioner-based solutions for practice based issues can sometimes be constrained if the environment does not facilitate such understanding. Especially, the availability of a facility to negotiate practitioners' needs, instead of seeking alternatives to solve them individually, and strategies to minimize the negative influence of external determinants on their classroom practices, are important to effectively use their potential in order to gain optimum outcomes from the knowledge they acquired through PD.

In general, despite all these issues and constraints, ESL teachers are struggling to upgrade their knowledge via on-going PD, which exhibits their interest to create practical and accurate decisions in relation to their classroom practices and delivery, and also, their dedication to implement best practices. This awareness demonstrates practitioners' willingness to undertake a key role in their classroom teaching and share wider responsibility with the management in transmitting knowledge to the learners through continuous direction. This knowledge oriented conception has special significance for the ESL teachers, because it inspires them to participate in PD activities to discuss their current issues and challenges and thereby updating their knowledge and skills.

#### IV. KEEPING DISCIPLINE KNOWLEDGE CURRENT

The final knowledge-oriented perception revealed how PD enabled practitioners to keep discipline knowledge up-to-date through exploring new information, perspectives, and practices in the ESL industry, as "today, there is a drastic change in every field as we know, even in ESL and in every subject, there is a development. So, in the changing world actually PD is very crucial" (Participant 10, Lines 162-163). This view was exposed by many participants, and their understanding demonstrates the need to be aware of the new developments and innovations in their field in order to cater for their classroom issues and challenges. Due to the significance of this perception for classroom practice, teachers tended to update through any type of PD in which they can reach this outcome. Participant 5, for example, reflected, "we have to engage individually or in sponsored programs. We need to get sharpened progressively to be effective teachers" (Lines 274-275). In addition, participants positively reported the support of regulatory bodies, foreign agencies, and other experts of PD as such institutions and individuals could provide various opportunities for updating their discipline knowledge. Participant 3, for instance, commented on a PD of a professional body for its exposure everywhere in the world. We know that the use of English always changes especially in the native countries and those changes come to our countries little later" (Lines 61-62). Likewise, as in the case of Participant 7, PD activities conducted by professionals from Western education systems enable teachers to gain a better awareness of their learners:

They [professionals from Western countries] have wide experiences about learners around the world. As teachers, we always have to identify our learners. So, we can understand what is happening around the world and through that we can identify our learners too. (Participant 7, Lines 58-61)

Notably, through this perspective of PD, participants were not revealing the lack of their existing knowledge for practice but, exhibited their enthusiasm for chasing new inputs in order to widen the currency in knowledge and for being aware of recent improvements in the ESL field (Al Asmari, 2016; Álvarez & Sánchez, 2005; Farooq, 2016). However, whether teachers discuss these aspects in their classrooms is largely dependent on local socio-political and educational environment in the country and teachers' "priorities, goals, opportunities and working contexts" (Gurney, Liyanage, & Haung, 2018, p. 514).

As indicated, the outcome of this knowledge-oriented perception of PD has broader significance for teachers given its support to negotiate new inputs and understand their benefits for the effectiveness of classroom teaching and learning.

Overall, enriching learner performance through developments in teachers' classroom practice was the key aim of knowledge-oriented perceptions of PD. However, one conception significantly diverted from this aim because it largely considered teachers' involvement in research for dissemination of knowledge, but collaborative action research undertaken by practitioners to resolve classroom issues can considerably enhance learner outcomes. As many ESL teachers in the university sector have no satisfactory pedagogical content knowledge as well as language teaching strategies developments in the needs of teaching role is especially important to them (Liyanage, 2010; Navaz, 2012). Particularly, in such context, if teachers are unable to reach the expected teaching/learning outcomes they tend to revise or lower their goals instead of trying to learn new

techniques and methods to achieve those expectations (Timperley & Phillips, 2003). As Piedrahita (2007) suggests, teachers can fill this void through PD and develop associations between theory and practice.

### **Knowledge orientation, managerialism and democratic professionalism**

Findings of the study demonstrate that participants' knowledge-oriented perceptions neither establish any special association with independent nor institutionally-facilitated PD activities. To which extent participants' perceptions were in line with managerialist or democratic professionalism was mostly determined by two key determinants; (a) the nature of knowledge expected to be achieved by teachers and, (b) perceived value and usefulness of the activity to satisfy their needs. When practitioners' aim was to achieve certain competency levels and thereby undertaking their classroom practices more constructively and effectively, they were likely to engage in self-directed PD activities, as reported by Participant 6:

I am not familiar with some of the areas. I teach English for Management students and many latest materials are available on the internet. I just get the assistance of it. Materials are available in order to tailor to suit the students. So...different teaching methodologies are suggested sometimes. You know bases are available for us for teaching English. So, these things assist me a lot. (Lines 106-110)

Similarly, when participants need to upskill knowledge relating to the ESL field, they were inclined to participate in independent PD activities for generating a potential knowledge base, through reading research articles, engaging in research, and attending conferences (Participants 1, 7 & 8). On the contrary, what participants perceived to achieve was directly supportive for managerialist goals, for example, employment context and its practices rather than for practitioners, sponsored PD sessions mostly regulated their participation. Participant 8 reflected this situation relating to a sponsored mandatory PD activity that she attended to learn the new University Test of English Language (UTEL)<sup>1</sup>:

Sometimes, we know only the theoretical and practical aspects of classroom teaching. We should also understand the importance of the tests such as UTEL for students' future employment, how to use UTEL materials in the classroom and assess students' performance" (Participant 8, Lines 305-307).

This means that participants considered the two factors stated previously in determining the type of PD they use to achieve knowledge-oriented outcomes.

## **V. CONCLUSIONS**

The knowledge-oriented perceptions of PD are largely connected to the acquisition, growth, and improvement of skills and expertise for improved classroom practices and dissemination of knowledge. In this context, students have the opportunity to engage in better learning situations and teachers to develop a potential knowledge base in ESL. These perspectives indicate participations 'self-motivation and interest for efficacy in their classroom practices in which they could assert teacher agency, autonomy, and accountability. Such professional goals can effectively be attained through the provision of institutionally-facilitated focussed PD activities or motivating practitioners to engage in independent PD. PD programs focusing on knowledge-oriented perceptions need to comprise relevant content and methods for enriching teachers' knowledge, skills and expertise that can support teachers' capacities to correctly recognize their practice-based issues and perceived reasons for them. Or else, providing a facility for consultation for teachers 'practice-based needs can also be beneficial for their knowledge construction and classroom teaching. Even though knowledge-oriented perceptions situated PD as a constructive model, this does not mean that practitioners always had the capacity to control over the acquisition and producing of knowledge when they engaged in PD under institutional mandate. In such instances, practitioners were unable to maintain their autonomy and pursue their individual goals as they become disempowered (Oolbakkink-Marchand, Hadar, Smith, Helleve, & Ulvik, 2017). Failure to position practitioners as one of the key stakeholders of PD by appropriately establishing teacher agency and identity in the employment context can negatively affect teachers' acquisition of knowledge and competence needed for achieving the efficacy of their on-going classroom practices.

### **Implications of the study**

As many ESL teachers in the Sri Lankan university sector have no adequate expertise of pedagogical content knowledge and language learning strategies provision of focussed PD activities is the key to heighten their knowledge and skills. Hence, gaining a thorough awareness of teachers' knowledge-oriented perspectives of PD is beneficial to cater for their needs through more productive PD opportunities. This means that, PD providers,

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<sup>1</sup>A national standardized English language test designed for all undergraduates in the state universities to benchmark their English language proficiency

policy makers and institutions can effectively utilize the findings of the study in designing, delivering and framing of PD programs in ESL in the tertiary sector in Sri Lanka and any other similar educational or organizational contexts. This may lead to heighten ESL practitioners' classroom practices and students' performance.

### Limitations and recommendations for future research

The study used an adequate number of participants required for this nature of research. However, if there were participants to represent the perspectives of ESL teachers in several other Sri Lankan universities and other similar contexts results would have been more generalized. The results of the study are valuable for all stakeholders in the ESL industry to understand the design and delivery of more focussed PD activities. Hence, if the study had represented the voice of PD providers and policy makers in relation to knowledge-oriented perceptions of PD more holistic awareness of the entire phenomenon would have been gained. Future studies should expose the knowledge-oriented perceptions of PD providers, policy designers and institutions in Sri Lanka and other contexts. Such studies need to consider how to design and deliver sponsored PD activities accommodating teacher agency, autonomy, and accountability or how to promote independent PD initiatives in a manner they achieve these goals or both.

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**Figure 1- Knowledge-oriented perceptions**

