ESL teachers' perceptions and design and delivery ofProfessional Development

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ABSTRACT: Identifying ESL teachers' perspectives of PD is important to provide them focussed Professional Development (PD)opportunities forimproved classroom practices and enriching their individual growth and well-being. A qualitative study was conducted with 8 ESL practitioners of a state university in Sri Lanka to understand the significance of PD for achieving the above outcomes. Semi-structured interview was used as the instrument for collecting data and Thematic Analysis for recognizing, arranging and interpretingthem. The findings of the study uncovered 14 perceptions of PD of which most have association with ESL practitioners' teaching and learning whereas others have implications for all teachers in general. Participants' perceptions are multi-dimensional in nature that demonstrates their understanding of the potential of PD activities for achieving multiple professional and personal goals.Although practitioners engage in both sponsored and independent PD activities to reach those goals they are likely to prioritize democratic over managerialist goals, thus they are inclined to undertake activities that help them achieve their democratic needs. The study has broad implications for all stake holders in the ESL industry as there is no alliance of perceptions of those who participate in PD activities and those who design and implement PD policies and practices.

Key words:*Perceptions, professional development, multi-dimensional, democratic needs, diversity*

I.   INTRODUCTION

In Sri Lanka, English has become a language of power and prestige (Herath, 2015; Ranasinghe & Ranasinghe, 2012) and the key for "social recognition and a secure future" (Liyanage, 2004, p. 9). As a result, presently, despite social, economic and political demarcations, people widely use English in various domains from lower to upper strata in society (Canagarajah, 2005), as a strong life skill rather thana second language or language that links local vernaculars(Prasangani, 2015; Ranasinghe & Ranasinghe, 2012). Although English plays a vital role in the Sri Lankan society, it is important to note that, nearly 75% of the students who are admitted to the government universities in the country lack English knowledge (Navaz, 2016). This is mainly because,the students in remote schools in the country have insufficient facilities and environment conducive to learning English in comparison with the students in urban schools (Liyanage, 2010; Ponnamperuma & Nanayakkara, 2018; Prasangani, 2014; Rathnayake, 2013). Secondly,during the general education, passing the English language paper is not a compulsory requirementto progress from one grade to the next (Abeywickrama, 2019).

In order to ensure that the university selected students have sufficient English language skills,the University Grants Commission (UGC) introduced the elective English language course in 1980s to be completed prior to commencing their degree programs. This course was replaced by English for Academic Purposes (EAP) in 2000, and it still being offered as a mandatory modulefor all degree programsfrom undergraduates' first academic year(Navaz, 2012).Thus, all graduates in the universities must complete these compulsory EGPA units as a fulfillment of their respective degrees(Dissanayake & Harun, 2012; UGC, 2017). Especially, the introduction of English-medium instruction to the university sector caused undergraduates to realize the value of English because they should acquire necessary English skills for pursing their academic studies in English medium (Navaz, 2016).Despite the material prospects, recognition, and prestige connected to English language, yet teachers are unable to motivate students to learn English (Liyanage, 2004). This situation is matter of the great concern to material and policy designers and of the UGC at present (Rathnayake, 2013). On the other hand, as many ESL practitioners in the Sri Lankan universities have Arts and Humanities background their content knowledge in other disciplines is low and inadequate (Abeywickrama, 2019). Therefore, improving English skills needed for students' academic studies is a hindrance and a challenge for them(Gajadeera, 2006; Ranasinghe & Ranasinghe, 2012).

In order to fill these knowledge gaps, teachers should participate in ongoing PD activities. Especially,focused PD opportunities are a must in enhancing student performance (Coldwell, 2017; Diaz-Maggioli, 2004; Mohan, Lingam, & Chand, 2017; Mushayikwa & Lubben, 2009; Saberi & Sahragard, 2019; Sixel, 2013; Tan, Chang, & Teng, 2015),"managing curriculum development innovation" (Wijeskera, 2012, p. 19) and pedagogical knowledge (Guskey, 2003; Merkt, 2017; Tinoca & Valente, 2015).Due to this background, the government and regulatory bodies in the country seriously consider PD opportunities for ESL teachers in the university sector in Sri Lanka(Perera & Canagarajah, 2010). Despite the discussions carried out at various academic and political forums in Sri Lanka for enriching university ESL practitioners' classroom teaching and learning (Dissanayake & Harun, 2012)via PD, yet consistent policy(Gunawardhane, 2018), appropriateness or connection cannot be seen in the available PD activities (Bandara, 2018; Gajadeera, 2006).If this is the case, being aware of teachers' perceptions of PD is important to provide them better outcomes through the available PD opportunities. Therefore, the aims of this study are to (a) understand university ESL teachers' perceptions of PD, and (b) examine the implications of participants' goals for attendance to PD activities.

What is P?

Teacher PD works as a multi-dimensional construct (Tan, Chang, & Teng, 2015)therefore, it has been defined in numerous ways. The constituents of these definitions provide a wider perspective for teacher PD and explorethe strong significance of them for teachers'growthand practice(Abeywickrama, 2019). As Evans (2008) claims, Day's (1997) idea on PDcan be considered one of the leading definitions existing in the literature:

> PD consists of all natural learning experiences and those conscious and planned activities which are intended to be of direct or indirect benefit to the individual, group or school and which contribute, through these, to the quality of education in the classroom. It is the process by which, alone and with others, teachers review, renew and extend their commitment as change agents to the moral purposes of teaching and by which they acquire and develop critically the knowledge, skills and emotional intelligence essential to good professional thinking, planning and practice with children, young people and colleagues through each phase of their teaching lives. (Day, 1997, p. 4)

Day's view focuses on twomain constituents: improvement ofclassroom teaching for effective knowledge transmission to learners as agents of change, and re-orientation of practitioners' knowledge and skills via collaborative ongoing learning and thereby improving quality of education. Days' key conceptions are in line with Richards and Farrell (2005) who consider teacher reflection a major element of PD as it explores various "dimensions of a teacher's practice" (p. 4), and with Glatthorn (1995) who situates PD as the professional growth a practitioner attainsby systematically observing his/her teaching practice and subsequent awareness of it.Similarly, for Mak (2010, p. 398), "activities that are designed and structured in a way that engages teachers in reflecting regularly"in terms of their own classroom teaching are the core for teacher PD.

PD is also positioned as a practice carried out by teachers for heightening their learner outcomes (Abeywickrama, 2019). As Hoyle and John (1995) conceptualize, PD is a way foroffering practitioners the new skills, methods and values to make effective their knowledge transmission and thereby, improving learner performance. Similarly, for Avalos (2011), teacher PD is that teachers' learning, learning how to learn, and transforming their learned skills into practice to provide better outcomes for their students. More broadly, Zhang's (2015) definition of PD underscores the importance of acquiring knowledge, skills and expertise to satisfy teachers' workplace requirements, enhance their professionalism and classroom teaching.Zhang's definition which is based on managerialist principles, primarily focuses on "application of effective teaching methods, development of curriculum design, conversion of teachers' role, expansion of major knowledge and development of language skills"(p. 2382). More specifically, for Alba and Sandberg (2006), heightening teachers' classroom practices and awareness, re-orientation of teaching profession, and contributing to major educational reforms and changesare the key outcomes of teacher PD.

Notably, Evan's (2008)outlines her view on teacher PD in relation to two constituents: *professionality*-connected to teachers' status and "*professionalism*"- linked withteachers' skills, knowledge and expertise (p. 15), and believes that teachers can enhance these aspects through meaningful PD activities. However, according to the National Council for Teacher Education (2009), teacher PD is a means for moving away from scholarly segregation and sharing knowledge, skills and perceptions with other teachers and stakeholders in the industry. Although the constituents of these definitions of teacher PD indicate overlapping, and occasionally, contradictoryand unconnected relationship the implications of them for practitioners in the ESL industry cannot be disregarded.

II. METHOD

This investigation aims to identify ESL teachers' perceptions of PD and what they expect to achieve by undertaking PD activities. As Lichtman (2013) underscores, this kind of objectivecan effectively be achieved through the qualitative case study method as it can "bring understanding, interpretation and meaning"(p. 17)to the entire phenomenon of ESL teacher PD in the Sri Lankan universities.

Context and participants

This study used a regional state university in Sri Lanka as a case in point to answer the proposed research questions. A regional university was chosen for the study consideringthe nature of opportunities received by such universities for teacher PD: occasionally, regional universities have no sufficient funds to strengthen PD while sometimes, there are broader opportunities for attendance to PD activities (Liyanage, 2010).

Ten ESL practitioners serving in the Department of English Language Teaching (DELT) was selected as the participants for the study. As indicated in the literature, researchers have widely used purposeful sampling method andsmall number of respondents for this type qualitative research. The aim of selecting participants purposefully is to allowing the researcher for developinga broad analysis of "information-rich cases" (Patton, 2002, p. 46). Per se,in spite of the sample size,(Given, 2008; Hogan, Dolan, & Donnelly, 2009), the study analyses all cases comprehensively to obtain a thorough understanding of their perspectives and of the employment context where they work (Savenye& Robinson, 2005).This means that the validity of the investigation is mostly determined by the nature of the study, and to which extent it explores "the complex in-depth phenomena" (Lichtman, 2013, p. 22).

The group chosen for the research (n= 8) consisted of five female and three male teachers, and both novice and experienced practitioners were among the selected group. All participants, except Participant 2, speak Sinhala as the first language while Participant 2' first language is Tamil. All participants' second language is English. All respondents are withpostgraduate qualifications, either Masters or PhD or both, and have Linguistics as a major in their Masters degrees.Excepttwo participants, all teachers have more than twenty years teaching experience in the higher education sector. All respondents are teaching English as a Second Language (ESL) and some teach other English courses that involve the units such as English for General Purposes (EGP), English Literature, English for Business Communication, and Business English. Nobody in the selected group has overseas teaching experience. The participants' demographics are presented in order to demonstrate the diversity of the subjects chosen for the investigation. This study did not examine the connections between those variables and teacher perceptions of PD. This is because such variables are unimportant to the theoretical aims of the research.Each participant has been given a number, and those numbers are used in the findings and discussion section to identify them.

Instrument

Qualitative interviews are able to give a new awareness to a complex situation (Folkestad, 2008). More specifically, semi-structured interviews can be regarded as the most valid instrument for use in this nature of research due to its potential as aqualitative data collection method and, on the other hand, its broad application for case studies (Abeywickrama, 2019; Abeywickrama & Ariyaratne, 2020). In comparison with other data collection methods, semi-structured interview has more flexibility and depth of questioning (Burns, 2000; Cohen & Manion, 1994; Hitchcock & Hughes, 1995; Zacharias, 2012), thus, the researcher has the opportunity to carry out the interview in a way the respondents are moved to unexpected directions, promote them for more detailed answerers, and understand their reasons for such reactions (Ashworth & Lucas, 2000; Cohen & Manion, 1994). This means that semi-structured interview can support the researcher to identify the phenomenon more holistically and resolve misconceptions.Due to this back ground, this instrument "tends to be most favoured by educational researchers" (Hitchcock & Hughes, 1995, p. 157). As such, the current study also used semi-structured interview as the tool to gather data from the participants.

Thematic analysis

As indicated in the literature, both inductive and deductive methods of Thematic Analysis (TA) were effectively used in qualitative studies(Frith & Gleeson, 2004; Halldorson, 2009; Jugder, 2016). Specifically, as inductive approach focusses on"individual meaning" and interpretation of complex situation (Zadrozny, Mcclure, Lee, & Jo, 2016, p. 219), the researcher can identifysignificant dimensionsfrom the general patterns recognized in the cases, and also various connections existed among dimensions (Patton, 2002).Hence, inductive method of TA is extensively used in the qualitative approach to recognize patterns in data which are collected

by interviewing participants based on the questions of the studies (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Ibrahim, 2012; Jugder, 2016; Yukhymenko, Brown, Lawless, Brodowinska, & Mullin, 2014).Especially, researchers have widely used TA in educational research over the last decade(Coldwell, 2017; Crowe, Inder, & Porter, 2015; Liyanage & Bartlett, 2010; Skinner, Leavey, & Rothi, 2019; Tan et al., 2015; Tuckett, 2005). Given this background, Braun and Clarke's (2006) six steps of inductive method of TA was considered appropriate for this study. The stages of TA: (1) familiarizing with data; (2) generating initial codes; (3) searching for themes; (4) reviewing themes; (5) defining and naming themes; and (6) producing the report broadly facilitated the researcher to recognize, analyze and interpret data.

III.   FINDINGS

Primarily, fourteen perceptions of PD were identified by analysing data gathered from the participant group. Later, they were categorized into four main groups of PD namely:*personal need-oriented perceptions, professional goal-oriented perceptions, knowledge-oriented perceptions, and outcomes-oriented perceptions,* in order to discuss each perception broadly (see Figure 1). Various goals and outcomes that can be achieved through PD are uncovered by these principal categories of perceptions.

Perceptions of PD

Personal need-oriented perceptions place PD in a manner in which teachers can achieve their wellbeing, satisfaction and individual growth. This means that, participants of PD activities are the real beneficiaries of them. On the contrary, professional goal-oriented perceptions prioritize the effectiveness of PD for teachers' career growth, success and accomplishments, and other peripheral needs implemented and practised by the management to achieve workplace quality and administrative requirements.Knowledge-oriented perceptions of PD demonstrate how PD initiatives support practitioners to develop their knowledge, skills and competence for enhanced classroom practice. The key outcome of this orientation is tofacilitate knowledge transmission to the students and to the academic community at large.From outcomes-oriented perceptions, the key motive for attendance to PD is to enriching the quality in teachers' practice (see Figure 1).
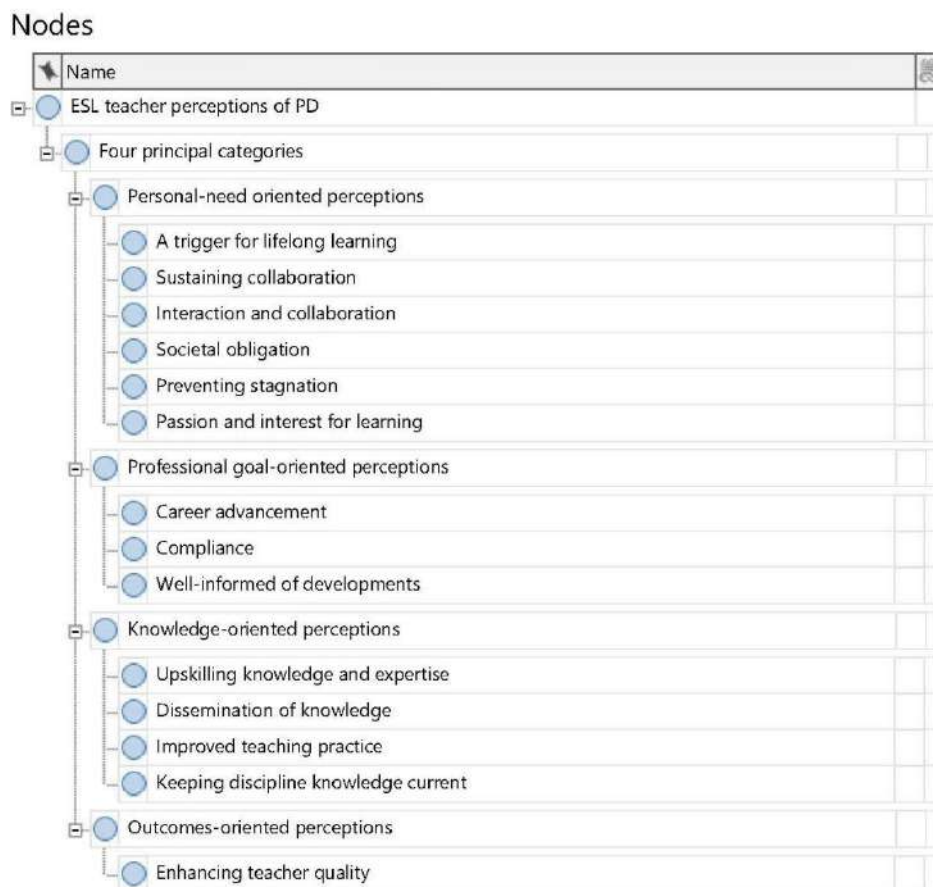

Figure 1: The node organizationin NVivo for the four primary categories of perceptions

Asreported by participants, some perceptions of PD have strong connection with the ESL teaching and learning field such as *well-informed of developments, keeping discipline knowledge current*, while many have more general association with all teachers in education, for example, all practitioners are responsible for *lifelong learning, improved teaching practice, enriching teacher quality, and collaborative practices*. Participants also positioned some perceptions negatively as they have lees implication for the classroom practices, for instance, *compliance and career advancement* in professional goal-oriented perceptions mostly aligned with the requirements of workplace context. However, most perceptions demonstrate potential to assist teachers' professional practice in various ways.

Although industry perceptions of PD always situate practitioners as agents serving for large organizational structures for reaching their educational needs and goals regulated by diverse socio-economic and political agenda of mega institutions(see Gurney, 2015), this is not always the case. Participants' perceptions also demonstrate that they as unique individuals are potential to recognize PD as a practice for achieving diverse personal and professional goals. Participants' perspectives indicate multiple teacher roles that they can undertake, for example, independent lifelong learners, knowledge seekers, researchers and knowledge disseminators, individuals promoting reflective and collaborative practices, need analysists and assessors, workers considering competitiveness and validity in the industry, career goals achievers, skilled practitioners with technological expertise, quality teachers and agents of change. Generally, all these perceptions connecting to either democratic or managerialist regulations, are attempting toimprove teachers' career, professional practice and quality.

Notably, participants' awareness of PD reported via their perceptions was neither considerably in line with the principal definitions of teacher PD in the literature nor significantly differs from them. It is important to note that participants' perspectives were broader than the views in the leading definitions of PD. For instance, participants' perspective of maintaining the quality in their practice both as professionals and individuals by fulfilling their broader responsibilities to employment context and to the community considerably diverges from the well-known definitions and understanding of PD. Even though PD was mostly positioned as a constructive learning enabling practitioners to reach their expected goals and outcomes, negative views were also reported by the participants, whereas, such conceptions had relatively very low significance.Thus, a through awareness of practitioners' diverse perceptions of PD is important to gain a holistic picture of ESL teaching and learning in the Sri Lankan universities. This understanding can instil some motives in teachers' professional lives and demonstrate various ways and means for utilizing PD in re-vitalization of their duties and needs.

Diversity in perceptions

As indicated in Figure 2, teachers' perceptions of PD are multifaceted in nature. This can be clearly seen through the practitioners' viewpoints, because each participant uncovered more than one perception of PD, and, in most cases, they fall into more than one principal category.
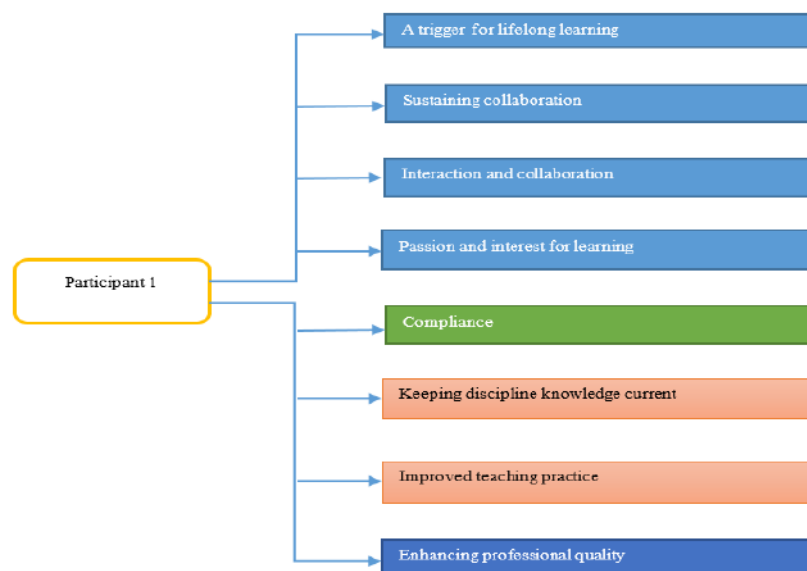

Figure 2- Participant 1 perceptions

Practitioners' diverse perspectives of PD expose the significance of collaborative and reflective practices, learning communities and undertaking action research in all stages of their profession. These practices

were specifically related to actual ESL classroom issues and management for instance, continuous monitoring of students' learning, designing appropriate teaching methods, and creating an environment to gain new learning skills and feedback for the quality of their practices.This background enabled practitioners to strengthenthe expertise needed for their professional practice from their individual conceptions, and experiment with the new knowledge despite the risk it may involve. Finally, through this process, practitioners can become self-efficacious and resilient. Most importantly, by understanding ESL related studies as a productive method of PD to develop their research skills, and thereby producing and disseminating knowledge, participants demonstrate their desire for contributing and reaching broad educational goals. Besides, as conceptualized by participants, PD can also support them to realize some changes through the advancement of their wellbeing, contentment and quality, for example, optimizing learner motivation, heightening learner performance, and improvement of their professionalism and standards.More broadly, teachers' perceptions of PD revealed their willingness either to re-evaluate or realize their professional goals via various PD opportunities, incorporating specialized knowledge such as the application of computer-mediated technology, internet assisted tools and the use of networking into all their practices instead of restricting to the traditional PD methods. This means that the diversity of these conceptions works in a complex and ambiguous way, especially in application of PD and achieving outcomes.

As Gurney (2015)claim, learners with high potential and capacity can nurture diverse perceptions of learning. This situation can be considereda constructive approach for developing creative thinking and innovation, thus, learners need to be promoted to treat learning as a "multifaceted construct" (Purdie & Hattie, 2002, p. 28). This means that learners have various ways and to reach their diverse perspectives. Practitioners' understanding of multi-dimensional nature of their conceptions, and the availability of diverse activities to enrich their intellectual, professional, and social capacities, demonstrate their holistic awareness of the phenomena (see Gurney, 2015).Even though it is argued that teacher cognition (Borg, 2003) or their personal beliefs underlying their practice(Borg, 2015) are important in deciding their perspectives of PD (Gurney, 2015), this view was not sufficiently supported by the findings of the current investigation.

Overall, the findings of the study point to need of providing more meaningful PD activities for ESL teachers in the Sri Lankan universities integrating practitioner perceptions and experiences with that of the institutions rather than considering PD as a compartmentalized practice for achieving managerialist goals of external bodies. Per se, these findings have implications for the institutions and policy-designers as there is no alliance of goals of those who attend PD activities and those who design and delivery of PD activities.

Implications of teachers' understandings of PD

The connection between participants' conceptions and goals always determined their attendance to PD activities. This means that participants' perspectives could reveal why they pursue PD and how they engage in those activities. Even though participants engaged in bothsponsored and independent PD activities to achieve their numerous goals, they often focused on democratic goals rather than managerialist needs.As such, activities that facilitate participants to attain their democratic needs were favoured by them. If this is the case, participants may neglect PD activities when they have comparatively less important goals or ignore such activities due to excessive workload andunwillingness(Gurney, 2015). Conversely, in certain situations, even though a PD activity had no exact connection with participants' goals, some events, happening or components in a session can provide significant learning opportunities for them. For instance, even a PD facilitator's personality and nature of delivery in a session can contribute widely to re-examine participants' character, behaviour and classroom management in a manner in which they heighten their students' outcomes, asin the case of Participant 1 :

> The way they [facilitators] stood there in front of audience taught us what we need to do when we walk in a classroom. And also, their delivery reminded us certain things that we used do improperly in our classroom context. So, they taught us not only about the field. Now, I remember a very interesting Power Point presentation they did with minimum wordings. So, it was very clear and it made me understand that when I do a Power Point presentation, it has to be very interesting to the students. So, I gained a lot. I believe that they were quality academics and very quality resource persons. (Participant 1, lines 282-289)

However, it is important to note that, these observations were extremely challenged by Participant 1 in her later reflection: "mandatory PD activities have no specific focus … which was not related to our subject" (line 332-334). Critically, most participants were of the same perspectives and understanding. For example, Participant 7's perception that "PD sessions are mostly for personality development and for other teaching qualities not relevant to ESL, and this hinders my attendance to such PD activities" (lines14-15), significantly aligned with what Participant 1commented previously. Conversely, Participant 8's perspective for attendance to PD activitiesdemonstrated his broader awareness of PD. He reflected "I have the knowledge but I may not always have effective communication skills, then knowledge will be there with me but it is very difficult to

share" (Participant 10, lines 46-47).This means that Participant 8has a complete understanding of the value of PD for enriching their disposition, communication strategies, and skills in their classroom practices. More specifically, participants' conception that components such as practitioners' interpersonal skills have no connection with PD indicates their inadequate knowledge and awareness of PD. On the other hand, what Participants 2 and 10 reported about PD that practitioners are responsible for satisfying the workplace needs and conditions instead of positioning PD as aninstrumentalistic tool did not align with the perspectives of other participants.

Therefore, ESL teachers' motivation to limit the outcomes of PD activities according to their understandings, as important and unimportant to their practices can hinder the opportunities that can be used to reach other valuable outcomes (Gurney, 2015). Given this background, developing teachers' understanding to treat PD as a resourceful opportunity,can improve their attendance to PD, and thereby heightening the outcomes that they gain for their personal growth and the ESL industry.Notably, the Staff Development Centres (SDC) in universities can largely support to provide a thorough awareness of the beneficial outcomes of PD initiatives through the curriculum, and the units of the Certificate in Teaching in Higher Education (CTHE). In this context, practitioners have the opportunity to understand the implications of PD for the areas such as "capability development, and curriculum designing and revision" (Abeywickrama, 2019, p. 143).

Most importantly, participants' perceptions also demonstrate that they broadly utilized the tool such as computer-mediated technologies and digital internet-assisted applications to reach their professional goals. This means that they have enthusiasm and inclination to work "as free agent learners" (Mushayikwa & Lubben, 2009, p. 376) acknowledging own responsibility for developing their practice. However, this is not the case. Even though the literature strongly suggests that digital and network technologies can support teachers' independent learning (Dabbagh & Kitsantas, 2012; Doak, 2018; Parsons et al., 2019; Sari, 2012; Visser, Evering, & Barrett, 2014) to which extent they have knowledge and self-regulatory skills to effectively use such tools and applications to enrich their career development is a question. Therefore, the responsibility of the institutions and governing agencies is to provide practitioners with the required "personal knowledge management skills" (Dabbagh & Kitsantas, 2012, p. 7) enabling them to customize and sustain such tools in managing independent PD activities.

IV. CONCLUSIONS

ESL teachers' have multi-dimensional perceptions of PD. While most of them are specifically related to ESL practitioners' classroom and professional practice others are important to all teachers in general. These perceptions indicate participants' understanding of the potential of PD activities for realizing diverse professional and personal goals.Even though teachers participate in both indepndent and institutionally-facilitated PD activities to achieve those outcomes they are inclined to prioritize democratic goals rather than satisfying the workplace requirements.

Implications, limitations and future research direction

Provison of PD for ESL teachers in the universities in Sri Lanka has special implication. This is mainly becuaseany training, professional degee or post-gratuate qualifications are not considerd essential for recruiting as univeristy ESL teachers. The study points to the need of planning the content and delivery of PD activities in a way they fill the knowledge gaps of teachers so as to enrich their professional growth and learner outcomes. These findings are also important to develop the quality and standards of ESL practitioners in the Sri Lankan university sector, and any other similar organizational and educational settings.

Although the literature has justified the small number of participants for this kind of qualitative study, if more respondents were in the sample representing a few other Sri Lankan universities or other contexts, the findings may have been more generalized. ESL teachers' perceptions of PD are particualrly significant for the institutions and policy designers, therefore, if the participant group had been included at least one of these stakeholders a comprehesive awareness of the entire phenomenon would have been gained.

Future research should explore the perceptions of PD providers, policy-makers and institutions in Sri Lanka and other contexts in orderto recognize the implications of their views for ESL teachers' professional practice. More importnatly, such invesitigations need to identify how to design and deliver PD activities in a manner they satisfy the PD needs of both providers and practicioners.

V. REFERENCES

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