



DELTA TEACHER DEVELOPMENT SERIES

Series editor: Sandy Millin

Overt Teaching

Putting learners at the centre of
their learning discussion

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4 Overtly working on your own development

Why might a more Overt Approach to professional development be needed?

As mentioned in ► Part A, the aim of this book is not to tell teachers how to teach English but rather to create a basic lesson framework that enables the overt discussion of learning, a framework which can be applied to any teaching approach. This same framework can be applied to virtually any learning, including teacher development. We have to admit that sometimes this is still challenging for us to do ourselves though! Over the years, we have often found ourselves in the position where we are following various threads of professional development but if we are honest, we sometimes do it in quite a disengaged manner. These threads lie at the back of our mind as something we know we want and need to work on, but we rarely do it in any overt or meaningful way.

For example, for many years David was aware that while his learners were progressing through the levels at his school, their listening scores in their level tests did not show the same progression between mid-course tests and end-of-course tests as in other areas. He identified listening skills as an area of developmental need and any time a workshop on listening skills was put on, he would attend. However, it wasn't until he was doing a diploma-level course and listening skills were a key component that he actually developed in this area or took any real overt action. Have you ever found yourself in a similar situation?

Identifying an area of development was an important step for David but the goal of 'Learning to teach listening skills' was too wide-ranging and overwhelming for him. Instead, David would have benefitted from the following four steps:

1. Have overt discussion with learners.
2. Set developmental aims and objectives.
3. Establish what success looks like.
4. Engage in reflection and ongoing discussion.

We will now look at each of these steps in turn, using David's goal as an example to show you how you might use them for your own professional development.

Four steps to Overt Professional Development

Step 1: Have overt discussion with learners

Once an area of development has been identified, it is important to gather as much information as possible from your learners. Our experience has been that learners are open to their teachers trying to develop and wanting to try out new methods and approaches. It is in their interest after all.

By carrying out diagnostic listening exercises and discussing with his learners what they found challenging, David could have uncovered specific learner needs within listening that would have narrowed his focus. When David finally did carry out overt discussions with his learners, he discovered that one of the areas they were really struggling with was decoding connected speech. This gave him a clearer goal to focus on in his own professional development.

Step 2: Set developmental aims and objectives

Just like with a lesson, your professional development objective is what you want to achieve and your aims are how you will do this. In the same way as when planning a lesson, it is important to begin with what you want to achieve in your professional development and work backwards to identify the objective and aims. In this situation, David wanted to be better able to teach his learners to decode connected speech by the end of the term. Once that objective was established, he had a focus for the term and could work backwards and decide what actions he could take to achieve this. His aims and objectives became:

This term, I will:

- ▶ Ask my manager to identify a colleague who is effective at teaching learners to decode connected speech.
- ▶ Observe this teacher and make note of the techniques they use related to connected speech.
- ▶ Try out these techniques in my classes.
- ▶ Discuss with my learners which techniques they found effective.
- ▶ Request an observation from my manager with a focus on my teaching of connected speech.

So that I can:

- ▶ Better prepare my learners to decode connected speech in conversation.

Step 3: Establish what success looks like

Identifying a series of actions that you can take sets you on the right path, but it is also important to establish what success will look like so that you know when you get there. It might seem like it makes sense for David to set success as 'My learners are able to decode connected speech'. This might even have been a future indication of success for him but for the term in question, David was focusing on gathering ways to teach learners, trying these methods out and gathering feedback on his performance from his learners and his peers. In a way, David was the focus of this professional development objective, as opposed to his learners. Setting achievable success criteria ensures the focus is clear and measurable. For David, his success criteria were:

Being better able to prepare my learners to decode connected speech in conversations means:

- Knowing at least 5 activities / techniques I can use to teach my learners to decode connected speech.
- Getting positive feedback from my learners on these techniques.
- Using these techniques successfully in an observed lesson.

Step 4: Engage in reflection and ongoing discussion

Reflection on your teaching does not have to be a time-consuming exercise and there are many approaches. For some, reflection on the success of the day's teaching will be an inner monologue on the teacher's drive or cycle home, as Mario Rinvolucri describes in his September 2019 episode on the TEFL Training Institute podcast. For others, it might be more structured, with notes being made in a reflection diary or on lesson plans. For David it tended to be the former, spending his commute home thinking back on the tasks and techniques he'd tried out that day, going over his learners' feedback and deciding what to try out next.

Instead of individual reflection like David's, some teachers might prefer to have ongoing conversations instead. These conversations could be with an academic manager or a colleague. In the same podcast episode, Mario Rinvolucri suggested mutual supervision where colleagues meet at regular intervals and talk through what has happened in their class that week. The idea is that the listener avoids giving their own opinion or advice on what they are hearing. Instead, they are giving the opportunity for the speaker to 'share the inner monologue', the same one she would have 'as she drives home or cycles home.' To be most effective, these reflective conversations should be sustainable, regular and actionable. They are, by their very nature, overt discussions of learning and progress.

Whatever method you choose, successful reflection should be:

- ▶ **Overt:** You cannot wait for it to happen. You have to make a conscious decision to carry it out, particularly when you first start reflecting on your teaching. As it becomes a sustained habit, it is easier to maintain. David had to remind himself to think about his goals each time he left work.
- ▶ **Sustainable:** Be realistic when deciding how you want to reflect. Consider how and when it can fit into your daily life without too much extra time needing to be set aside, for example during your commute as David did.

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- ▶ **Regular:** Reflection does not have to be every day, but it does need to happen regularly for you and your learners to benefit from it.
- ▶ **Actionable:** As you reach the end of your reflection, come up with an actionable step. Whether you were successful in your efforts or not, what one thing will you do next to continue developing? For David, he next looked at testing his learners' abilities to decode connected speech, moving on from developing his teaching techniques.

Following these four steps should help you to put yourself at the centre of your own professional development.