

Faculty Forum

Leverage Professional Learning to Build Trust and Enhance Teacher Engagement

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This article describes a structured seven-step professional development (PD) model that was initiated and implemented at the Persian Farsi School (UPF) of the Defense Language Institute Foreign Language Center (DLIFLC). The program intended to improve collaboration, trust, teacher engagement, and instructional effectiveness, and to enhance student learning outcomes. Recognizing the challenge of effectively translating professional learning into classroom practice, this professional development model adopts a systematic approach to meeting faculty needs. It incorporates data-driven needs assessments, targeted training workshops, reflective post-workshop discussions, classroom mentorship, trend analysis and systematic follow-up, best practice sharing, and centralized resources for ongoing learning. Of particular importance to UPF have been the steps related to classroom implementation, mentorship, class observation, and feedback as well as trend analysis and systematic follow-up. Faculty members who participated in this cyclical PD process reported increased engagement, better integration of various teaching methodologies, and improved responsiveness to student feedback. This approach shows potential for replication across DLIFLC programs, directly contributing to the mission of developing combat-ready linguists.

Keywords: *Cyclical Professional Development, Teacher Engagement, Collaboration*

INTRODUCTION

At the heart of DLIFLC's mission to produce combat-ready linguists is a commitment to effective teaching—one that begins with empowering educators, as their professional development is essential to training proficient linguists. While DLIFLC provides a variety of faculty development opportunities, one persistent challenge remains: How to translate professional development opportunities into individual faculty learning that leads to long-lasting instructional change. At the Persian Farsi School (UPF), this challenge has been identified. Despite faculty participation in workshops and training events, implementation into classroom practice has often been inconsistent. This inconsistency has led UPF leadership to review the professional development model, placing a larger emphasis on helping teachers reflect on their current teaching practices in order to develop new strategies to “provide exquisite, regional and culturally based foreign language education,” in addition to building trust between faculty and leadership and the institution.

Recognizing these challenges, UPF embarked on a transformative journey to build not only a professional development program, but also a culture of collaboration, trust, and accountability. Then, UPF developed a structured professional development model that extends beyond traditional workshops. This model aims to improve teaching practices and enhance student learning outcomes. In addition, it emphasizes the importance of building relationships, providing responsive support, and sharing responsibility for growth. The ultimate goal of this model is to cultivate a culture of trust that empowers faculty to grow, collaborate, and take ownership of their professional development, leading to improvements in student learning. Hargreaves and O'Connor (2018) emphasize that without trust, professional learning remains superficial or compliance-driven, whereas high-trust environments enable educators to take risks, engage in candid dialogue, and assume collective responsibility for improvement. As trust deepens, faculty will start to see positive changes in student engagement, and professional conversations evolve—moving from compliance to curiosity and from resistance to reflection (Hargreaves & O'Connor, 2018). This progression reflects a movement toward collaborative professionalism, where trust functions as the engine that transforms professional development into sustained instructional growth and improved student learning outcomes. Accordingly, this cultural transformation is not a secondary outcome but a central and intentional objective of the UPF PD Model.

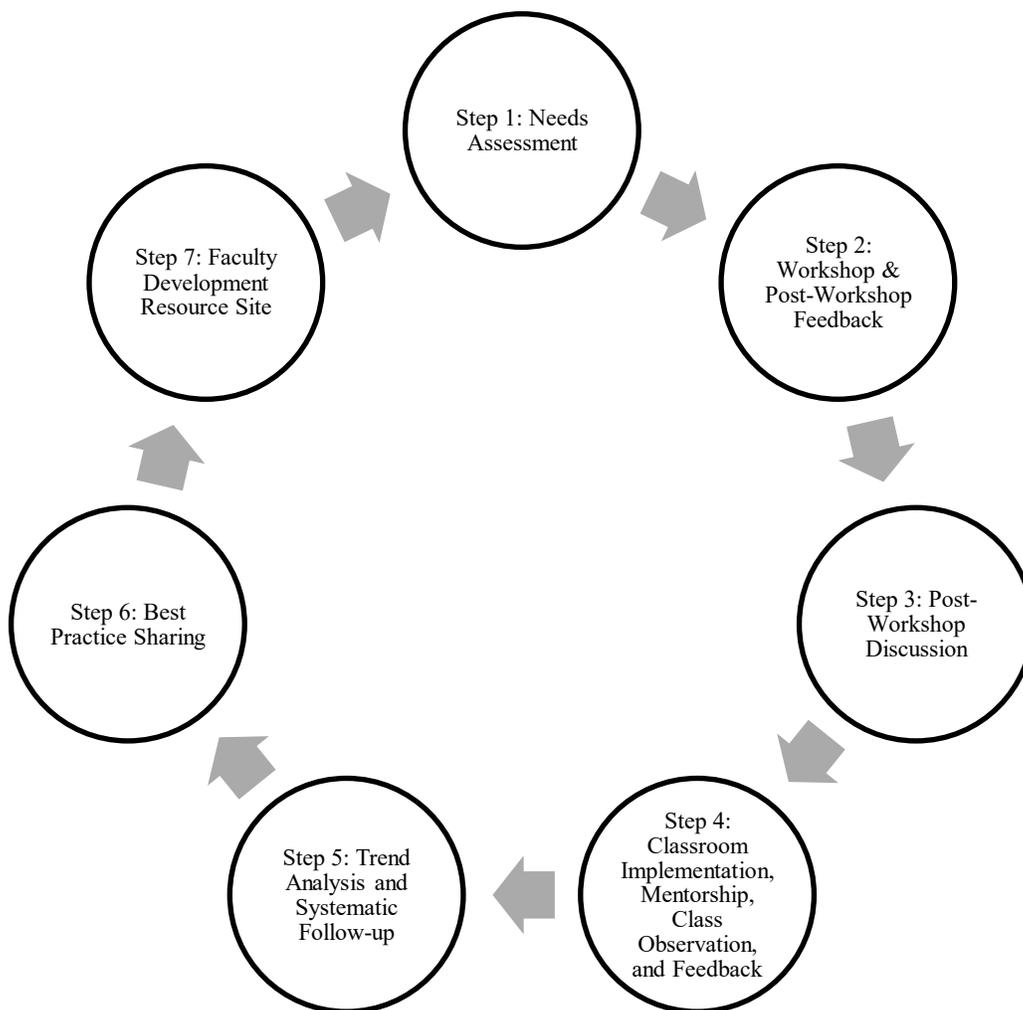
The UPF Professional Development Model consists of seven structured steps designed to enhance the effectiveness of PD workshops and strengthen faculty engagement. This model was initiated by the UPF Academic Specialist overseeing the faculty development function at UPF, approved by the UPF Dean, implemented by the UPF Faculty Development (FD) team, and monitored and followed up by the Academic Specialist to ensure continuous improvement. The following sections outline each step of this model and emphasize how UPF is intentionally connecting professional development with trust-building, instructional effectiveness, and results aligned with its mission.

PERSIAN FARSI SCHOOL SEVEN-STEP PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT MODEL

The model is cyclical and follows seven steps as shown in Figure 1. The cycle includes: (1) needs assessment; (2) workshop and post-workshop feedback; (3) post-workshop discussion; (4) classroom implementation, mentorship, class observation, and feedback; (5) trend analysis and systematic follow-up; (6) best practice sharing; and (7) a faculty development resource site.

Figure 1

Persian Farsi School Seven-Step Professional Development Model



Step 1: Faculty Development Needs Assessment

A systematic and data-driven approach to faculty development begins with a comprehensive needs assessment and a deliberate process for organizing and analyzing the data collected. UPF gathers faculty development data through multiple formal and informal sources. Specifically,

data are first classified by source and level of formality, including: (1) formal faculty-identified needs, collected through faculty surveys focusing on professional development priorities, challenges, and areas for growth; (2) informal and formative feedback, gathered through workshop evaluations, end of course feedback meetings, and faculty mentoring sessions conducted by the UPF FD team; (3) leadership and supervisory feedback, solicited by the Academic Specialist and FD team from Department Chairs, Team Leaders, and the UPF Office of the Dean; (4) student performance data, such as Very Lower Range (VLR) DLPT results, unit test grades, and proficiency test outcomes; and (5) cross-school perspectives from other Undergraduate Education (UGE) schools to ensure institutional alignment.

Once collected, data from these sources are organized into thematic domains (e.g., instructional strategies, assessment practices, student engagement, language proficiency development, and faculty support needs). The UPF team then conducts a gap analysis by comparing faculty-identified needs with observed instructional practices and student performance trends to identify areas of convergence and discrepancy. Findings from this process are used to define faculty development objectives, prioritize professional learning topics, and determine appropriate delivery formats (e.g., workshops, mentoring, or best practice sharing). This structured approach ensures that professional development decisions are transparent, evidence-informed, faculty-driven, and aligned with institutional goals, with the goal of ultimately strengthening instructional effectiveness and student learning outcomes.

Step 2: Workshop and Post-Workshop Feedback Collection

Following the needs assessment, the Academic Specialist and Faculty Development team analyze the data to design upcoming faculty development workshops. Workshop development is guided by principles of adult learning, collaborative professionalism, and contextualized instruction, emphasizing relevance, faculty voice, and immediate classroom applicability. Each workshop is intentionally designed to integrate relevant educational theories with target-language-specific classroom examples, instructional demonstrations, and hands-on activities drawn from UPF instructional contexts. Most workshops are two to three hours in length. To ensure continuous improvement, after each workshop, faculty participants receive a post-workshop survey, allowing them to evaluate the effectiveness of the session and suggest improvements. Additionally, for some workshops, the UPF FD team reaches out to attendees proposing a date and time for an in-person post-workshop feedback session, typically scheduled for the following week. The agenda of these sessions and notes taken serve as a good alternative to survey forms. The agenda includes three areas: (1) key takeaways from the workshop; (2) participants' plans for applying and disseminating the knowledge gained; (3) suggestions for improving future workshops. The collected data through surveys, alongside observational notes taken from the in-person post-workshop feedback sessions, are then shared with the UPF Dean and Academic Specialist to refine future professional development initiatives.

Step 3: Post-Workshop Discussion

The post-workshop discussions help faculty engage with the high-priority workshop content, reflect on how they can apply the content, and collaborate on creating materials and lessons. Facilitated by the UPF FD team and Academic Specialist, these discussions encourage participants to share insights, articulate plans for classroom integration, express willingness to be observed during implementation, and identify best practices that can be scaled school and institution wide. The insights that emerge from these discussions are reflective and compare current practices with what is being proposed. Some typical questions are: Is the practice manageable in the given time? Will this practice add value? Will it appeal to students at different levels of proficiency? In these sessions, facilitators document feedback, track emerging themes, and identify areas requiring follow-up support. By maintaining records of these discussions, the FD team ensures that faculty development initiatives remain responsive to evolving instructional needs and contribute to a culture of continuous learning. These discussions not only enhance individual teaching practices but also create an opportunity for faculty sharing.

Step 4: Classroom Implementation, Mentorship, Class Observation, and Feedback

The most effective professional development includes structured classroom support, such as mentorship, class observations, and tailored feedback to help faculty implement workshop learning and turn insights from Steps 1-3 into actionable practices. There are two options for faculty engagement in Step 4: (1) having peer observations and follow-up sessions with the FD team or (2) giving mini-presentations to their colleagues. While observation is the preferred option, peer presentations still support the goals of reflection, implementation, and knowledge sharing. These presentations also provide FD Specialists with opportunities to collaborate with teachers and guide them in identifying instructional practices that may benefit their peers. Moreover, this process helps build trust between the FD team and instructors, as faculty recognize that the FD team's intent is to support professional growth and instructional effectiveness.

For the observation option, once the teacher selects an activity for the class, the FD team arranges a pre-observation meeting where they review the lesson plan to ensure proposed activities meet the objectives. Next, the class is observed by the FD Specialists, and the teacher gathers feedback from the students. Then, a post-observation meeting is held in which the FD Specialists give feedback and the students' feedback is reviewed to identify pros and cons. This provides ample data for the teacher to improve for the next iteration. For example, one teacher introduced a rubric in class to evaluate peer work and the students suggested that it be simplified. In another class, a teacher led students to create cultural narration and memes using pictures, which they reported to find meaningful. Teachers continue to prefer participating in classroom observations and follow-up discussions with the FD team over giving presentations, and the number of observations is steadily increasing.

Step 5: Trend Analysis and Systematic Follow-up

To evaluate the effectiveness of professional development offered at UPF, the Academic Specialist developed a structured assessment and follow up plan. This plan incorporated classroom observations, post-observation feedback sessions, trend analysis, and systematic follow-up to ensure the implementation of workshop strategies. For instance, in July and August 2025, after a schoolwide training on bottom-up listening strategies, the Academic Specialist tasked the FD Specialists to use the UGE Class Observation Form to observe listening classes and identify best practices for implementing bottom-up listening strategies in the classroom. As a result of the trust built between the teachers and the FD team, 22 teachers volunteered for classroom observations. Consistent with Step 4, after each observation, the FD Specialists met individually with teachers to discuss their strengths, areas for improvement, and specific development suggestions.

Related to Step 5, the Academic Specialist guided the FD Specialists to conduct a trend analysis based on their classroom observations and notes. The trend analysis showed that among the 22 teachers observed, seven teachers consistently implemented bottom-up strategies. In contrast, many other teachers showed partial adoption or significant gaps in their approach. The trend analysis also revealed recurring instructional challenges, including the need for more learner-centered practices, greater integration of peer learning, and more effective use of transcripts. The Academic Specialist then shared the findings with the UPF Department Chairs and the Dean to facilitate follow-up classroom observations and provide feedback to teachers for improvement.

To support instructors in their ongoing professional development and to ensure the effective implementation of teaching strategies, the Academic Specialist directed the FD Specialists to conduct follow-up observations with teachers who needed improvement. This was the first step towards accountability. The purpose of this process was to help integrate the strategies learned in workshops into classroom practices. Additionally, the Dean tasked the Department Chairs with conducting their own classroom observations and providing individualized feedback to their respective teachers, further promoting accountability. The Dean also holds biweekly one-on-one meetings with the Chairs to ensure they consistently conduct class observations and monitor the implementation of strategies in the classrooms. This structured system, which includes data-driven trend analysis, systematic follow-up, leadership oversight, and iterative feedback, promotes a culture of accountability. Its ultimate goal is to enhance instructional practices and improve student proficiency outcomes.

Step 6: Best Practice Sharing

Teachers learn valuable lessons from implementing new approaches. These lessons merit wider dissemination across DLIFLC as a community of learning. To amplify the impact of faculty development, the UPF team supports faculty to share their implementation experiences and instructional innovations with peers by identifying best practices and encouraging faculty to share them, helping faculty prepare to share, and leading discussions on the benefits of sharing.

Firstly, the Dean, Academic Specialist, and FD Specialists identify best practices and encourage faculty to present their practices at UPF, and then the Academic Specialist or FD Specialists arrange meetings to discuss possible sharing formats and topics. Primarily, there are two options: a discussion forum or an individual presentation. A discussion forum is organized if more teachers have undergone the same process. If only one teacher has undergone the experience, then a Best Practices presentation will be organized, followed by a Q&A session. Once the presentation topics are confirmed, the UPF team proceeds to the second part of Best Practice Sharing: supporting teachers in preparing for their sharing sessions. This includes reviewing and discussing the abstract and presentation slides, and providing constructive feedback to ensure alignment with the goals of best practice sharing. Participating teachers then present their key insights and instructional practices during the forum, followed by a facilitated discussion. During these presentations, presenters typically begin by connecting their classroom instructions to the UPF workshops they attended, outlining the strategies and theoretical frameworks they implemented. They then share concrete classroom application examples, including student cases, learning outcomes, and feedback from students and colleagues, as well as their own reflections and future plans.

At the conclusion of the presentation or after the presentation, the UPF team facilitates a discussion with the audience and presenters to reflect on the benefits of sharing. For instance, when a best practice presentation is rooted in the implementation of strategies or knowledge gained from a previous workshop, the reflection emphasizes that the session is not a repetition of the original training. Instead, it highlights how the learning was applied in meaningful ways to enhance student outcomes. These discussions also underscore that teachers often derive diverse insights from the same professional development experience. Through these exchanges, faculty members gain exposure to multiple perspectives, broadening their pedagogical toolkit and reinforcing a culture of continuous learning.

The sharing of implementation experiences seeks to enhance instructional quality by encouraging teachers to adopt effective strategies that have been successfully used by their peers. Faculty members reported increased openness and confidence in experimenting with new approaches and tailoring them to better meet student needs. For example, one teacher demonstrated strong openness and actively incorporated strategies introduced in the *Making Special Assistance (SA) Hour Effective* workshop into their SA Hour sessions. This instructor also shared their best practices with colleagues across UPF and UGE. Notably, several at-risk students from this teacher's class—who had previously undergone Academic Assistance Review Board (AARB) intervention—successfully passed the Defense Language Proficiency Test (DLPT) and reported that the instructor's support played a key role in meeting their learning needs.

However, convincing teachers to present at the school or institute level remains a significant challenge, as participation has been inconsistent. For example, in May 2024, four teachers attended an iteration of a workshop, and two co-presented at the school level after much encouragement. In contrast, in June 2024, fifteen teachers participated in two iterations of the same workshop, yet only one chose to present the lessons learned. Overall, only some teachers

opt to present at the school or institution level. The majority prefer presenting to smaller, department-level audiences, where peer review is not required. To support this preference while still fostering professional dialogue, UPF actively encourages departmental-level presentations. These smaller-scale interactions seek to generate a ripple effect of shared practices and insights, with the goal of ultimately contributing to a broader community of learning.

Step 7: Establish Faculty Development SharePoint to Centralize Resources

Creating a centralized resource site takes time and planning. Ongoing challenges have included maintaining accurate records and materials (e.g., presentation abstracts and slide submissions), securing faculty buy-in, and obtaining consent to record the presentations. To address these challenges, UPF launched the Faculty Sharing Pre-Presentation Submission process in early 2023. As part of the process, faculty share all their materials prior to the presentation and give permission to be recorded, and the UPF team uploads their video (with minor edits if needed) to the UPF FD SharePoint site. By adopting this structured approach, both the numbers of faculty presentations and attendance have increased. By the end of 2024, UPF had successfully conducted 84 in-person sessions, with a notable 15.2% rise in participation between 2023 and 2024. The availability of recorded sessions (65 in total at the time of writing) has further expanded the initiative's impact. Between June 2024 and September 2025, the recordings were viewed 40 times.

The Next Step: Linking Faculty Development to Student Success: A Data-Driven Approach

Moving forward, UPF will monitor and continually refine its assessment and accountability system to evaluate the effectiveness of professional learning initiatives and their alignment with student learning outcomes. As part of this system, UPF will consistently identify the specific needs of each teaching team and department by analyzing students' academic performance, course grades, and faculty input. Based on these findings, UPF will continue to follow the model by providing tailored professional development training, one-on-one mentorship, class observations, and targeted feedback meetings to address instructional challenges and assess changes implemented. For example, after identifying Diagnostic Teaching as a priority area through ongoing needs assessments, UPF provided training for all faculty members and received unanimous positive feedback from 23 participants, all of whom rated the workshop as highly effective in supporting both faculty and student learning. The Office of the Dean determined that all the Chairs are required to include certain predetermined elements in their regular class observations, as of January 2026. These elements will be based on the faculty development workshop topics. This level of accountability in classroom observations by Chairs is new for UPF. For teachers who are identified as needing further support after the Chair observation, the regular 7-step model will be followed.

To ensure meaningful evaluation, UPF will also collect data through student and faculty surveys and conduct focused group discussions to measure the perceived impact and relevance of the professional development events. Student feedback will be gathered at end-of-course feedback sessions alongside faculty reflections to assess the outcomes of training and identify

opportunities for continuous improvement. Additionally, students' final DLPT results will be categorized into above- and below-ILR 2 on the DLPT for listening and reading. The Academic Support Team will then identify the PD sessions their teachers attended and review if their attendance potentially had an impact on students' DLPT scores. Also, during end-of-course feedback sessions, the Academic Support Team will ask students if their teachers engaged in the activities they were trained on. This data-driven, cyclical approach seeks to promote instructional excellence and faculty engagement as well as strengthen the direct link between faculty learning and student success. The goal is to create a culture of continuous reflection, accountability, and instructional improvement aligned with UPF's mission and DLIFLC's goal of developing combat-ready linguists.

CONCLUSION

The Persian Farsi School's seven-step professional development model is a framework designed to identify teaching challenges and establish a process that meets teachers where they are, guiding them to where they need to be. This model aims to build trust, enhance faculty engagement, promote faculty growth, and ultimately improve student learning outcomes. Of particular importance to UPF have been Steps 4 and 5: "Step 4: Classroom Implementation, Mentorship, Class Observation, and Feedback" and "Step 5: Trend Analysis and Systematic Follow-up." By systematically assessing faculty needs, delivering targeted workshops, supporting classroom implementation, fostering mentorship, using class observation analysis to enhance accountability, and promoting best practice sharing, this model fosters learning transfer into teaching practices. The model underscores the importance of analyzing professional development training and its application in classrooms. By implementing this model, UPF experienced an increased interest among the faculty in adopting new ideas and sharing their experiences with peers at UPF and across DLIFLC. However, this rise in professional development and collaboration does not necessarily indicate a direct improvement in student learning outcomes. Additionally, UPF has embraced the model as a tool for fostering a culture of trust, recognizing that impactful professional development is deeply rooted in relationship-building and mutual respect. Through alignment of training efforts with collaborative reflection, shared goals, and transparent communication, the model supports both instructional improvement and trust-building within teams. This dual emphasis not only enhances faculty engagement and morale but also strengthens instructional consistency and student support. With its structured and scalable design, the model holds strong potential for replication across other DLIFLC programs, thereby directly supporting the Institute's mission of developing combat-ready linguists.

REFERENCES

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