

EFL Teachers' Perceptions of Professional Development

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Abstract

It is an indisputable fact that English has become today's lingua franca. That being the case, the prominence of English is broadly recognized, particularly in EFL settings. Therefore, in those countries where English is not frequently spoken, professional development of English teachers is highly significant to sustain and better the quality of the education provided. Hence, this study aims to investigate Turkish EFL teachers' beliefs and habits about professional development through conducting a qualitative research by focusing on the information gathered from observations and interviews. The study involves several different participants varied in gender, nationality and years of experience with different departments in the field of language in one of the practicum schools located in İstanbul in 2016. Results of the study show that most teachers view professional development as “a must” due to different, but equally valid reasons and thereby engage in various activities to develop themselves professionally and to continue their growths.

Keywords: EFL teachers, professional development

1. Introduction

It is an undeniable fact that English has become today's lingua franca. That being the case, the importance of English is widely recognized, especially in EFL settings. Therefore, in those countries where English is not commonly spoken, professional development of English teachers is highly important to sustain and better the quality of the education provided. Professional development can be defined as any attempt that increases a teacher's professional knowledge in means of content, pedagogy and technology. This development can be achieved via various means such as attending to conferences or seminars, receiving in-service training, attending to workshops, reviewing academic literature, and receiving higher education. Professional development is not only prominent for individuals and the quality of education, but it can also affect how learning occurs, and can produce a significant improvement in the learning process (Lin, Cheng & Wu, 2015). Due to the significance of professional development in today's world of education, this paper tries to investigate how EFL teachers perceive professional development, what they do to develop themselves professionally, and what their future plans are.

Considering the importance of professional development, it is not surprising to see several studies conducted in the field, investigating educators' thoughts on this issue. For instance, Mizell (2010) emphasizes that teachers value professional development since it helps them better their pedagogical approaches, which in return, fosters learning processes of the students. Richards and Farrell (2005) highlight the prominence of continuous professional development for teachers to become accustomed to the most recent developments in the field.

Ekşi and Aydın's study in 2012 tries to determine English teachers' perception of professional development. Their views show an alteration from one another concerning the departments they graduated from as well as the years of teaching experiences they have. For

instance, Sentuna (2002) studied the correlation between the years of experiences teachers have and the needs they feel for their professional development. The researcher divided the teachers into two groups as experienced and novice teachers regarding the years of their practices in the field. Findings showed that the experienced teachers were less interested in the topic than the novice teachers.

In addition to that, the experienced teachers were more reluctant to search for new approaches, methods, and challenges in the teaching area than the novice teachers according to the research made by Karaaslan (2003). As Karaaslan (2003) found out, if a teacher gets more experience in his profession, he might prefer to continue using the old methods, and he might not be willing to change the way of practicing since he feels safer in that way. Moreover, Day (1999) found out that a vast majority of the experienced teachers start to feel disappointment, become monotone and lose their faiths in their professions. On the contrary, teachers who have less experience in the field are more eager to try out new approaches and techniques than older teachers.

Other than these findings, researchers found out that experienced teachers are also unwilling to make some changes regarding their lesson plans and classroom management styles. They might be relying on their lesson planning and classroom management skills since they have experiences in the field more than ten years. For that reason, they might not think that they need any kinds of development on these particular issues. However, they should be considered as the most significant areas. To illustrate, Ozen (1997) and Alan (2003) stated that teachers wanted to develop their abilities concerning classroom management mostly. Additionally, Gultekin (2007) indicated that the novice teachers seemed to have more problems in that area than the experienced instructors, and the experienced ones were also not interested in lesson planning as much as the novice instructors.

According to Maria & Garcia (2016), networks and informal online societies provide a significant seed of professional improvement as they give an opportunity to the instructors in means of interacting in collective teaching, sharing their teaching experiences and providing mental support to each other. Their research indicates the present theories and methods, the primary features and experiences of networks and online communities. In addition to these, it analyzes their influences in teachers' professional improvement.

To sum up, it appears that English teachers tend to have different viewpoints of professional development according to their workload, the departments they have graduated from and how long they have been teaching. Moreover, the number of studies conducted in this area proves the importance of professional development in our field. On the other hand, most of these inquiries focus on the teachers' perceptions of professional development instead of what they actually do to train themselves.

Our study aims to fill in this gap by trying to find an answer to this particular question: "What do English teachers do for their professional development?". It attempts to investigate not only EFL teachers' perceptions, but also what they do and what they plan to do in means of professional development.

2. Methodology

2.1. The Setting

This study aims to investigate Turkish EFL instructors' perceptions of professional development as well as the activities they engage into for their professional growth by conducting a qualitative research in one of the practicum schools located in İstanbul in 2016. The study attempts to investigate and interpret the meaning of professional development through an in depth qualitative research by focusing on the information gathered from observations and interviews involving several different participants.

2.2. Participants

Our study was conducted at a well-known private school in İstanbul, Turkey. The primary reason for selecting a wide range of experienced instructors from the field was to be able to gain a broad variety of insights, perceptions and ideas regarding professional development.

The 15 participants varied in gender and nationality; there were both male and female teachers, as well as both native and non-native ones.

Most of the participant were graduates of “English Language Teaching”. However, there were some teachers who graduated from departments like “English Language and Literature” and “Translation and Interpretation Studies” as well as unrelated departments like “Business and Administration”.

While most participants held only a BA degree, two of them held an MA, and four of them had certificates of teaching English as a second or foreign language, such as CELTA, DELTA and TESOL.

All of the participants we have interviewed had at least 5 years of experience in teaching English. However, most of them only worked at private schools, and only a few experienced both private and public schools.

Moreover, all of the teachers we interviewed had worked with several different age groups except pre-elementary students. Some of them favored one age group over another, but since this type of information is beyond the limits of our study, it is not included.

2.3. Data Collection and Analysis

For the study, the data were collected through observations and interviews. The observations were made during all three authors’ practicum period which lasted for more than 6 months. During this term, the authors were receiving their pre-service training, and they observed various classes and teachers. In between those lessons, the authors had several occasions of small talk between them and the teachers they have been observing. They talked

about some new ways to develop themselves professionally. These observation-based data are completely different from the ones that were acquired through interviews; the interviews were conducted in a more structured way. They mainly consisted of two parts; the first focusing on acquiring demographic data, the latter focusing on the essence of this study. The questions were open ended and therefore the talks were semi-structured. All interviews were conducted individually and face to face. Collecting data using those methods helped us to explore our study deeply and elicit information that cannot be collected via other means.

All the interviews were first recorded, then transcribed and analyzed qualitatively. The participants' answers were analyzed according to three main categories; teachers' perceptions, actions, and future plans in means of professional development. The following are questions from each category:

- How can teachers develop themselves professionally?
- What was the most significant event that helped you develop professionally?
- What are your future plans in means of professional development?

3. Results and Discussion

In order to find out of Turkish EFL teachers' perceptions, actions and plans of professional development in the practicum school, data obtained through observations and interviews were analyzed under three main categories.

3.1. EFL Teachers' Perceptions of Professional Development

Perceptions of the teachers in the practicum school differs from each others' according to their beliefs, expectations, practices and the philosophy they adopted. Most of them refer to various methods for their professional development. For instance; some of the participants told us that they prefer webinars whereas others rather attend seminars or enroll in certification programs. Additionally, most of the participants defined professional

development as the process of acquiring some particular skills to be able to teach effectively. They clarified the contributions of those methods to their professional growths. Some EFL teachers, on the other hand, defined professional development as a means to get a better job and earn more. However, all of our participants showed great interest in the subject.

A 32-year-old native EFL teacher asserted the following:

“Professional development is a must. I hold two different BA degrees along with an MA.

Teaching another language is not something you can do without educating yourself first.”

Observing all our participants’ interest in professional development was a strong indicator of this issue’s grave importance in our field.

3.2. What EFL Teachers Do in means of Professional Development

Most participants that we have observed and interviewed were very ambitious in means professional development. Almost all of them stated that they try to attend to seminars/conferences, they are members of certain websites that are built for this purpose, and they follow academic developments and try to implement the findings in their classrooms.

As an example, a female teacher who has been teaching English for the past six years asserted the following:

“I try to attend seminars and webinars... I follow certain teaching blogs and people over Twitter. I enroll in online trainings. But, I prefer online communities as I like the fact that you can find some real life-based experiences there. That’s why it is easier to count on their suggestions and implement those in my classroom.”

Our observations confirm what she had said during the interview; this teacher actively uses online driven methods in her classroom. She constantly tries new things in the class. To exemplify, she started using an online tool called “Class Dojo”, an application whose number of users increase day by day. It enables a teacher to keep track of her students and their

progress by a simplified and smartened version of the classical reward/punishment system. Teachers can award or decrease their students' points, and students can track their progress as well. We believe that she had learned about this tool from an online source since it is so popular over the internet.

Another EFL teacher stated the following:

"I find seminars and certificates as a must. You have to develop yourself professionally or you will end up in a remote school. I have CELTA, and without it, I cannot imagine finding a decent job."

This teacher has been teaching English for 16 years and she holds a BA in ELT. She constantly emphasized the importance of certification and seminars throughout our interview. She claimed that most EFL teachers are so competitive that one must develop him/herself professionally in order to have a better job.

Another teacher asserted the following:

"We mostly attend in-service training courses before the term starts and we learn a lot of new strategies and methods related to language teaching. For example; the use of online interactive learning tools and studying platforms like 'Moodle' as well as language assessment and material preparation techniques."

3.3. EFL Teachers' Future Plans of Professional Development

Almost all of the instructors had different plans for the future regarding their professions. For instance, one of the instructors who wants to pursue her academic career stated the following;

"I want to continue studying and get a master's degree. I prefer to work with the adults rather than young children since they seem to be more responsible and eager to learn things rather than attending the class only physically."

Another teacher reported the following;

"I will consider working with another institution which provides me a higher income and better opportunities. I also want to attend more seminars to learn new methods and techniques to be able to improve myself in the field."

Additionally, two EFL teachers gave some contradictory information about the administration. One of them stated that;

"The administration does not support our development at all. I want to attend conferences more often. When I ask the administrators' permission, they do not let me participate in those seminars even though they hearten me at first. The reason why they do not give permission is that while I am attending those courses, there will be no one covering for me."

However, the other EFL teacher asserted that;

"Our administration encourage us to take part in the in-service courses at the beginning of the year and enables us to develop our teaching abilities."

4. Conclusion and Implications

The present study aimed to figure out an answer to this particular question: "What do English teachers do for their professional development?", as well as attempting to investigate Turkish EFL teachers' perceptions, what they do and what they plan to do regarding their professional development. The perceptions of professional growth arisen from the present study are abreast with those found in the related studies such as Mahmoudi and Özkan's (2015), and Alibakhshi and Dehvari's (2015). Professional development is a significant issue concerning most EFL teachers nowadays. It is mainly perceived as an ongoing growth in knowledge regarding content, pedagogy and technology. Most teachers view professional development as "a must" due to different, but equally valid reasons. Therefore, they engage in various activities to develop themselves professionally. These activities vary from attending to seminars to seeking higher education. Due to the never-ending nature of professional development, considering the advancements we rapidly witness in means of

methodology and technology, each EFL teacher also has a future plan to continue their growths.

In this study, the collected data were provided by two gathering sources; interviews and observations. In a further study, a researcher can use similar means of instruments, considering the scope and the nature of this study to collect more detailed information about teachers' professional development. Since a qualitative inquiry will result in a more thorough analysis and enable the researcher to elicit an in-depth understanding of the issue, a similar approach will be appropriate and sufficient. However, conducting a qualitative research based on evidence collected through interviews only may result in conclusory and inconsistent information; therefore, one should benefit from observations as well, if possible. Moreover, to augment the base of this research, one can also include the institution's viewpoints on the issue. The thoughts of administrators or other staff members can be undeniably invaluable to pass on. Involving the institution can also aid teachers to develop themselves professionally.

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APPENDIX 1: Interview Questions

Demographic Questions:

1. Are you Turkish or from another country?
2. Which department are you graduated from?
3. What is the highest degree you have obtained?
4. How long have you been teaching English?
5. Have you worked in a public school before?
6. Which age groups have you worked with?

Research Questions:

1. How would you define professional development as a teacher?
2. How can teachers develop themselves professionally?
3. What do you do in means of professional development?
4. What was the most significant event that helped you develop professionally?
5. Does your institution support these kinds of activities/studies? Why/How?
6. What are your future plans in means of professional development?