Exploring Non-Native English Teachers' Professional Development Practices

Sibel Korkmazgil and Gölge Seferoğlu

Abstract

One-shot professional development activities designed and accomplished without considering teachers' needs are generally reported to fail to lead to long-lasting changes in terms of teacher growth and learning. Therefore, professional development programs need to be based on the immediate needs of teachers, and designed and directed with teachers' input. In this regard, this study aims to investigate a group of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers' professional development practices in Turkey in order to examine their perceived needs, professional development tools they use, and challenges they face. Data were gathered from 98 non-native English Speaking Teachers (NNESTs) working in Turkish state schools through the survey instrumentation. The results indicate that many of the EFL teachers were currently engaged in PD activities, but these activities were mostly the in-service seminars or workshops which were considered mostly obligatory. Furthermore, the perceived PD needs were found to be related to "improving classroom management skills", "using technology", "applying the FL national standards", and "building awareness of target culture".

Keywords. Professional development, EFL, In-service training, Pre-service teacher education

Introduction

Foreign language teaching as a profession has undergone rapid changes in the past few decades. The critical perspectives developed out of the debates on globalization, the spread of English and the growing emphasis on English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) have dramatically altered our views with regard to language learning and teaching. Language learning is now seen more as an ideological inquiry rather than a systemic discovery. Furthermore, sociocultural theories contribute greatly to our understanding of language learning as a process of identity formation and social revolution. One might well suggest that such shifts in paradigms have questioned the native speaker models in language teaching and teacher education, and strengthened the demands for critical second language teacher education (SLTE) (Pennycook, 1989; Prabhu, 1990).

The emerging body of research on SLTE, especially on teacher cognition (Borg, 2003; Freeman, 2002) has begun to construct a very different understanding of how teachers learn to do their work. The research shows that L2 teacher learning continues throughout their lives and emerges out of their experiences in social contexts. It depicts L2 teachers both as users and creators of knowledge who are capable of making decisions about how best to teach their students within socially, culturally, and

Sibel Korkmazgil, Middle East Technical University, Faculty of Education, Dept. of English Language Educationsi,belkorkmazgil@gmail.com

Gölge SeferoğluMiddle East Technical University, Faculty of Education, Dept. of English Language Educationgolge@metu.edu.tr

historically distinct and complex contexts. Action research (Wallace, 1998), the teacher research movement, the reflective teaching movement (Schön, 1983; Zeichner & Liston, 1996), and Postmethod pedagogy (Kumaravadivelu, 1994) have all contributed to our understanding of teachers' way of knowing. This climate of change encourages teachers to engage in continuous professional development and become autonomous critical reflective practitioners.

Teacher Input and Professional Development

Teachers need to engage in professional development activities in order to update their knowledge and skills. Although both pre- and in-service teacher education programs attach great importance to inform teachers about the professional development opportunities that they might use throughout their career, research to date has yielded disappointing results regarding the effectiveness of these endeavors. Recent research has shown that one-shot professional development activities which are designed by people other than the teachers themselves and accomplished without taking into account the immediate needs of teachers are generally reported to fail to lead long-lasting changes in terms of teacher growth and learning (Oliva & Pawlas, 2001; McCarthy & Riley, 2000). Gelter (2003) states that reflective thinking is uncommon among the practitioners in education. Merely providing teachers with opportunities to reflect and activities that encourage professional development does not guarantee that they contribute to teacher development (Mewborn, 1999). Not every form of professional development is of itself relevant to all teachers. Then the question that needs to be answered is how. How can we ensure that teachers engage in professional development when they are struggling with their workload in their busy lives?

Examining the literature, Mann (2005) summarizes the main characteristics of language teacher development. According to him, language teacher development

- is a bottom–up process and as such can be contrasted with top–down staff development programmes;

- values the insider view rather than the outsider view;

- is independent of the organisation but often functioning more successfully with its support and recognition;

- is a continuing process of becoming and can never be finished;

- is a process of articulating an inner world of conscious choices made in response to the outer world of the teaching context;

- is wider than professional development and includes personal, moral and value dimensions;

- can be encouraged and integrated in both training and education programmes (Mann, 2005, p. 105).

Recent research has shown that any activity or program which aims to contribute to teachers' professional development needs to be based on the immediate needs of teachers, and designed and directed with teachers' input. Kohl (2005), for example, examined the professional needs and interests of ESL and foreign language teachers in North Carolina. Having analyzed the responses given by 170 teachers to the survey he developed, Kohl concluded that almost all of the participants expressed some need for discipline-specific professional development. Using the same survey implementation, Anderson (2008) replicated Kohl's study, but this time with 58 ESL teachers from South Carolina. Her study revealed a moderate need for professional development. It also showed that teachers with more teaching experience and a high level of perceived oral proficiency tended to have less of a need for professional development than teachers with less experience and lower levels of perceived oral proficiency. In addition, teachers were most likely to indicate that the strongest professional development needs were related to technology and maintaining language skills. Upon reviewing the results of this research, Anderson (2008) argues that "professional development activities need to be relevant and relate to the foreign language educator's professional trajectory" (p.109).

The significance of teacher input in the planning and implementation of professional development activities has also been revealed in a research study conducted by Daloğlu in 2004. The study presents an inservice teacher development program which focused on establishing a materials bank for English language teachers working at a private primary school in Ankara. The program developed by the researcher involved teachers in every step of the process, from needs analysis to the production and implementation of the materials bank. The results have shown that teachers not only improved their knowledge and skills on the issues regarding materials design and curriculum, but developed a positive attitude towards professional development as well. It is more likely that unlike one-shot workshops generally organized as top-down in in-service training, the participatory nature of the program has empowered the teachers and made their voices be heard, and their views appreciated, thereby increasing the sense of ownership and self-confidence for their future professional development activities. Emphasizing the role of teacher input, Daloğlu (2004) points out that "to ensure immediate benefit from in-service development activities, such programs need to be school-embedded and the aims of the programs need to be identified by the teachers who will be participating in them" (pp. 688-689).

The Study

Purpose of the Study

The present study aims to investigate English language teachers' professional development practices in Turkey in order to examine the professional tools they use, their perceived needs and concerns. The following research questions guide the study:

1. What types of professional development practices are the participants currently engaged in?

2.   What are their professional development needs?
3.   What are the perceived challenges they face in teaching English?

Research Design & Methodology

This study is a quantitative, descriptive study. The survey entitled *Survey of Professional Development Needs of Second Language Teachers* was adopted from Anderson (2008) and Kohl (2005). Taking the Turkish context into account, the researchers have made some modifications with regard to the survey items. Some context-specific items such as those asking for the certificates that the teachers hold, and those asking for the incentives that the local districts provide for the teachers are excluded from the survey. Furthermore, the items asking for the certificates, grades and classes that the participants are teaching were included in the survey. Two experts from the field have checked the modified version of the survey. However, due to the lack of access to the target population in question, instead of piloting the survey with English language teachers, think-aloud protocol has been administered with four English language teachers to ensure the reliability and validity of the survey. Two open-ended questions were included at the end of the survey asking the participants to comment on the challenges that they face in teaching English in Turkey, and the suggestions that they might come up with regarding the issues in question. Data were gathered from 98 English language teachers in Antalya, in October, 2011. The participants in this study are English language teachers employed by Turkish Ministry of Education in primary and secondary state schools. The data from the survey were analyzed using the software SPSS.

Results & Discussion

Demographic Data

98 English Language teachers participated in this study. In regard to the gender of participants, 66 (67,3%) were female and 32 (32,7%) were male. Of the 98 participants, 62 (63,3%) have graduated from the department of English Language Teaching, 25 (25,5%) from the department of English Language and Literature, while 11 (11,2%) from other departments. As to the number and percentage of teachers based on grade levels taught, it is possible to state that 56 teachers (57,1%) were primary school teachers teaching Grades 4 to 8, while 42 teachers (42,9%) were secondary school teachers teaching Grades 9 to 12. The teaching experience of the participants is summarized in Table 1. The results indicate that 20,4% of the teachers were novice or relatively new teachers while the majority had over 5 years of teaching experience. The most common experience category was between 6 and 10 years followed by 11-15 years. Of the 98 participants, 74 (75,5%) indicated that they had access to ELT journals, reference books and Internet resources. However, only 4 indicated that they were members of a professional association or professional organization.

The Teachers' Perceived Level of Proficiency in English

The teachers' perceived level of proficiency in English summarized in Table 2 indicates that the most common perceived level of proficiency was *advanced*. Their perceived level of proficiency regarding grammatical knowledge differs from the other three categories as the most common perceived level of proficiency for grammatical knowledge was advanced (65,3%) followed by superior (27,6%). However, for the other three categories, the advanced category is followed by intermediate, and then superior. Of 98 participants, 91 (92,9%) indicated their level of proficiency for grammatical knowledge as either advanced (65,3%) or superior (27,6) – which are the greatest percentages for both categories. Intercultural Competence, on the other hand, has the greatest percentages for intermediate and novice levels. 32 teachers rated themselves as having an intermediate proficiency level; 7 as novice proficiency level.

The Factors That Most Influence Their Teaching

In the survey, the participants were asked to identify the factors that most influence their teaching. The participants were allowed to choose as many factors as they would like. The responses were shown in Figure 1. The results in Figure 1 indicate that the most common factors are "teaching experience & beliefs" and "past experience as a language learner" which were both mentioned by 52 participants (53,1%), followed by "learners' expectations" (N=47) and professional training (N=43).

Systematic Ways Used to Reviewing Their Lessons

The participants were also asked whether they used any systematic ways to review their lessons. Of the 94 participants who responded to this question, 86 (87,6%) said yes. The teachers were then asked to identify the systematic ways they use to review their lessons. The teachers' summarized responses are illustrated in Table3. *Getting feedback from students* and *Exams* were found to be the most common ways used by 79 participants. Among the least common ways were diary keeping and attending online communities which were indicated by 10 out of 96 teachers. Finally, two teachers did not respond to this question, which is why the responses totaled 96 and not 98.

The current professional development involvement of EFL teachers was also examined in the study. The EFL teachers were asked what professional activities they had participated in over the past five years. The professional development activities in which teachers participated are listed in Table 4 along with their reported frequencies.

Furthermore, the teachers who indicated that they attended a PD activity in the last 5 years were asked if their participation was mostly obligatory or up to them. Of the 94 participants who responded to this item, 63 (67%) stated that their participation was mostly obligatory, while 31 participants (33%) indicated that their participation as "up to me". The results indicate that many of the EFL teachers were currently engaged in PD activities. However, these activities were mostly the in-service seminars or workshops which were regarded mostly as obligatory. Thus, it is possible to state that they were not typically attending PD activities by themselves in/outside of the school district.

Another question examined the effectiveness of the professional development activities attended by teachers with regard to improving their teaching practice. In order to address this research question teachers were asked about the degree to which they believe that the professional development activities in which they have participated over the past 5 years have helped them improve their teaching practice. The teachers' summarized responses in Table 5 indicate that the professional development activities tended not to be helpful or only somewhat helpful. Specifically, only 20 teachers believed that the professional development activities greatly helped them, 45 indicated that they somewhat helped them, 14 indicated that they did not help them much and 11 indicated that they did not help them at all.

Personal Need for Professional Development

In the survey, teachers were asked to rate their personal need for professional development activities relative to their area of foreign language. The teachers' summarized responses are illustrated in Figure 2. The results in Figure 2 indicate that teachers were most likely to feel that they have a moderate personal need for foreign language related professional development (N = 42). However, as many as 37 participants indicated a high need for foreign language professional development and 15 indicated a very high need. Only 4 participants indicated a low need for PD activities. However, none of the teachers indicated that they had no need at all.

Teachers were also asked to rate their level of need for professional development based on a list of specific instructional skills. The ratings were based on a scale of one to five with five indicating the highest level of need. The teachers' summarized responses are illustrated in Figure 3, and indicate that on average, teachers had the greatest need with regard to improving classroom management skills (mean = 3,27). Furthermore, all mean instructional skill ratings indicated at least some need for professional development given the fact that all of the mean ratings were above 2.

The Perceived Challenges

Teachers were also asked to identify at least three of the most significant challenges which, they believe, pose difficulties in teaching English in Turkey, and hinder their professional development. The responses given to this open-ended item were analyzed through content analysis, and the major challenges identified are shown in Figure 4. The most frequently cited challenge is about the course books they use in their teaching practices. Course books are considered to be inadequate and irrelevant. Additionally, the fact that they are not allowed either to adopt or adapt their own course books is considered to be another source of challenge for the teachers. The second major problem identified is about the students' lack of motivation in learning English. Other challenges teachers pointed out are crowded classrooms, insufficient time, top-down syllabus followed in all schools across Turkey, lack of technological devices and not having opportunities to practice English outside the classroom.

Discussion

This research study aims to explore English language teachers' professional development practices in Turkey to examine the professional development tools they use, activities they are engaged in, their perceived needs and concerns. The results indicate that many of the EFL teachers were currently engaged in professional development activities. However, these activities were mostly the in-service seminars or workshops which were regarded mostly as obligatory. Thus, it is possible to state that they were not typically attending professional development activities by themselves in/outside of the school district. As for the effectiveness of these activities, the study revealed that PD activities tended to be helpful or somewhat helpful.

As for their perceived needs of professional development, the study revealed that the professional development needs of English language teachers varied; however, overall there was a moderate-to-high need for professional development among teachers. None of them indicated that they had no need at all of professional development opportunities. In addition, EFL teachers were most likely to indicate that their strongest professional development needs were related to "improving classroom management skills", "using technology", "applying the FL national standards", and "building awareness of target culture".

The most common challenges the NNESTs mentioned with regard to teaching Englishwere related to the coursebooks they use, students' lack of motivation in learning English, crowded classrooms and having insufficient time while trying to apply the syllabus applied all over the country. The suggestion of 'traveling or studying abroad' was indicated by 10 teachers as an additional comment: Teachers were asked if there was any other information that they would like to share related to the professional development of English language teachers in Turkey. Most of the teachers did not provide additional comments. However, of those who did, one point deserves attention. 5 teachers stated that it would be better if they were given a chance to travel or study abroad. Studying abroad provides nonnative speakers an opportunity to improve language skills as well as intercultural competence. Actually one of the participants stated her feelings very strikingly as follows: "*I am an English language teacher, but I have never spoken to a native speaker in my life… and I feel very sorry for that*". Speaking to a native does not entail only going or studying abroad, of course. Considering the results of the study which show that out of 74 teachers who had access to Internet only 4 were members of a professional association or organization, and most of the participants indicated high need for using technology, teachers might be informed how to get in touch with the online ELT community through online communities of practice in future professional development program.

Conclusion

The study has revealed that in-service training constitutes the main practices of EFL teachers for their professional development. Therefore, taking teacher feedback into account, the effectiveness of current in-service training programs conducted by Turkish Ministry of Education may well be carefully evaluated. Likewise, the future professional development activities need to be designed and directed with teachers'

input. Professional developers should focus their efforts on where the highest needs lie. EFL teacher participation in planning and implementation of professional activities might well empower teachers, make their voices be heard, and their views appreciated, thereby increasing the sense of ownership and self-confidence for their future professional development practices. Furthermore, it is apparent that teachers are not aware of the bottom-up professional development practices. To ensure that they will engage in continuous professional development throughout their careers, teacher-led professional development practices need to be introduced and encouraged both in pre- and in-service training programs.

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Anadili İngilizce Olmayan Öğretmenlerin Mesleki Gelişim Uygulamaları

Özet

Öğretmenlerin ihtiyaçları dikkate alınmaksızın planlanan ve tek seferde gerçekleştirilen mesleki gelişim faaliyetlerinin öğretmenlerin gelişimi ve öğrenimine yönelik uzun vadede değişimlere yol açmada çoğunlukla başarısız oldukları görülmektedir. Bu nedenle, mesleki gelişim programlarının öğretmenlerin hâlihazırdaki ihtiyaçlarını temel alması ve öğretmenlerden alınan bilgilere dayanarak planlanıp yönetilmesi gerekmektedir. Bu bağlamda, bu çalışma Türkiye'de yabancı dil olarak İngilizce öğreten öğretmenlerin mesleki gelişim ihtiyaçlarını, kullandıkları mesleki gelişim yöntemlerini ve karşılaştıkları zorlukları araştırmak amacıyla bu öğretmenlerin mesleki gelişim uygulamalarını incelemeyi amaçlamaktadır. Çalışma verisi Türkiye'deki devlet okullarında çalışan anadili İngilizce olmayan 98 İngilizce öğretmeninden anket yöntemi kullanılarak elde edilmiştir. Bulgular İngilizce öğretmenlerinin pek çoğunun mesleki gelişim aktivitelerinde bulunduklarını göstermektedir, ancak bu aktiviteler çoğunlukla zorunlu olarak düşünülen hizmet-içi eğitim ya da çalıştaylar olarak görülmektedir. Ayrıca, "sınıf yönetimi becerilerini geliştirme", "teknoloji kullanımı", "Yabancı Dile yönelik ulusal standartları uygulama", ve "hedef kültüre yönelik farkındalık geliştirme" alanlarına yönelik mesleki gelişim ihtiyaçları belirtilmiştir.

*Anahtar Sözcükler:*Mesleki gelişim, EFL, hizmet-içi eğitim, hizmet-öncesi öğretmen eğitimi