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English language teachers' perceptions on professional development: A case study of in-service teachers in Muğla¹

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Abstract

Professional development (PD) is not just a short term involvement but a long process starting from teacher training at university and going on throughout the working life of the individuals. Therefore, it is thought that teachers pass through different stages in their careers and have different perceptions on their PD. Teachers' thoughts, attitudes, motivation, and the stages they pass through affect their performance in the workplace. This study aims to reveal the perceptions of English language teachers on PD and what kind of practices they employ to become more professional. It is a descriptive and explorative case study into professional development of in-service teachers. During the data collection and analysis, qualitative research design was employed. By employing a purposeful sampling, the qualitative data were gathered from 9 non-native English in-service teachers working at different state schools in the west of Turkey during the spring term of 2016-2017 education year. Semi-structured interviews were benefitted to collect data. The analysis showed that teachers were aware of the significance and necessity of PD and saw it as a process which helped them to be more knowledgeable and experienced. They also pointed out that involving in such studies could increase their motivation and confidence.

Keywords: Professional Development, Career Stages, In-service Teachers, Life-long Learning

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Introduction

Professional development is not just a short term involvement but a life-long process starting from training at university and going on throughout the working life of the individuals (Bolam, 2000; Craft, 1996; Fullan, 2001; Glatthorn, 1995; Kennedy, 1995). According to Fullan (2001), PD is the development of a person's learning experiences, which are formal or informal, throughout his/her career life from starting point of a profession to retirement. It is described as a process in which teachers can improve their intellection of role, career, self and develop their professional competence (Duke and Stiggins, 1990). According to Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) (2005), PD is defined as the activities which help teachers to develop their personal skills, knowledge, professional skills, and other characteristics.

Attending in associations and conferences (local, national, international) related to English language teaching, subscribing ELT journals, participating in electronic discussion groups and using the Internet to access language teaching and learning websites, working on curriculum or textbook development teams, searching issues in their own classrooms or participating in research projects, working collaboratively with professionals in other fields, being mentored by experienced colleagues and then becoming mentors to a novice teachers are some activities suggested by Crandall (2001) to become a better-informed and developed teacher.

There are also some other professional development activities which are favored in the field (Boyle, While, & Boyle, 2004). Attending seminars, workshops, qualification programs; reading journals and periodicals related to ELT; observing peers; doing classroom and action research; going to observation visits to other schools, etc.

Burden (1982), in his study, gathered rich data from teachers and concluded that there were three stages of teachers' career development, in each of which teachers' perceptions on professional development differ:

- Survival Stage is the first year of teaching.
- Adjustment Stage includes the second, third and fourth year of teaching.
- Mature Stage includes the fifth year of the teaching and beyond.

In the survival stage, teachers learn how and what to teach. In the adjustment stage, teachers learn about curriculum, methodology, classroom management, their students' needs, etc. In the mature stage, they gain professional intellection. They have a good command of teaching and learning.

A number of researchers have investigated the role of professional development in second and foreign language teaching contexts (Blandford, 2000; Caena, 2011; Craft, 1996; Desimone, 2009; Guskey, 2002; Hill, 2009; Özdemir, 2013; Zehir Topkaya and Çelik, 2016). They stated that professional development had an important role in teaching quality and students' achievement. In their studies, some researchers (Blandford, 2000; Garet, Porter, Desimone, Birman, Yoon, 2001; McDonald, 2009) showed that PD had a direct or indirect effect on students' learning. A relationship between teachers' improvements in their

professions and students' success was also identified (Borko and Putnam; 1995). The results showed that the more the teachers developed their teaching ability, the more confident they were in their teaching.

Some researchers (Boyle, While, and Boyle, 2004; Guskey, 2000; Garet et al., 2001), who examined professional development activities of teachers, pointed out that teachers participated in a lot of PD activities (both alternative and traditional). Some other researchers have also worked on career stages model (Burden, 1982; McDonnell, Christensen, and Price, 1989; Rinaldi, 2007). They argued that the teachers' behaviors, perceptions, attitudes, intellections, activities would change throughout their career.

Methodology

Research Questions

In the Turkish context, there is limited number of research examining the perceptions of in-service teachers at different stage levels. The aim of this study is to define the descriptions and perceptions of English language teachers on professional development and what kind of practices they employ to become more professional. It further investigates how teachers' perceptions differ at different career stages. To reach this goal, this study seeks to find answers to the following questions:

1. How do teachers describe professional development?
2. What are the teachers' perceptions on professional development?
3. What strategies do they employ for their professional development?
4. How do people at different career stages perceive professional development?

Participants

This study was carried out during the spring term of 2016-2017 education year. The qualitative data were gathered from 9 non-native English in-service teachers working at different state schools in the west of Turkey. The participants include 4 males and 5 females with different teaching experience. Their teaching experience differed between 1 and 27 years. They had no private school experience. All had been working in high schools. Three of the teachers had been working in the same school since they became language teachers and had only high school teaching experience and others had elementary school, secondary school and high school teaching experience. Only two of them (1 male and 1 female) had M.A. degree. The details related to the participants are listed below in Table 1.

Table 1*Participants*

Career Stages	Number of Participant	Participant	Gender	Year of Experience
Survival		P ₂		1
Survival	3	P ₈	3 Males	1
Survival		P ₉		1
Adjustment		P ₁		3
Adjustment	3	P ₄	3 Females	4
Adjustment		P ₆		4
Mature		P ₃	2 Females	26
Mature	3	P ₅	1 Male	21
Mature		P ₇		17

In the study, a purposeful sampling method was employed. They were all willing to take part in this research study. English language teachers at different stages according to Burden's (1982) model were purposefully included.

Data Collection Tools and Analysis

This study is a descriptive case study into professional development of in-service teachers. Case study methods allows researchers to investigate the data in a particular context. Yin (1984) points out that descriptive case studies are used to identify the natural phenomena happen in the data in question.

Semi-structured interviews were used to collect data. The interview questions were developed after examining some research studies (Atay, 2006; Burden 1982; Zehir Topkaya and Çelik, 2016), and getting advice and views of some experts in the field.

All of the participants were informed about the ethical issues and that their personal information would not be used by anyone. All of the interviews were recorded and transcribed word by word soon after the interviews. Since all of the participants were foreign language teachers, the language of the interviews was English. By agreeing with the teachers on their convenient days, all the participants were interviewed on different days in their working place. Each interview lasted approximately 20 minutes and all of them answered the questions openly and enthusiastically. They seemed to be ready to share their perceptions.

The qualitative data analysis in this study included the process of coding, categorizing, making sense of the essential meanings of the phenomenon. First of all, the data gathered were organized and coded. The connections between codes were searched during and after coding. Responses were categorized and then the themes were identified. Among the vital issues in the qualitative research, reliability and validity are significant. To ensure the

reliability, it is vital to demonstrate the methods used were reproducible and consistent. After coding and determining the categories, the other researcher applied the same procedures. After checking the similarities and differences between the two researchers, the reliability was obtained with the inter-coder reliability using the formula suggested by Miles and Huberman (1994) and it was found reliable (0.87).

Results

Following the order of the research questions, the findings will be presented. The analysis of the data were put under categories and presented in tables.

RQ 1. How do teachers describe professional development?

Table 2

Definitions of professional developments

Theme	Categories	Codes
Definitions of Professional Development	Lifelong/Ongoing Process (6)	-It's a lifelong process -It's a lifelong and changing process. -An ongoing process. -Lifelong process. -It is an ongoing process in a person's proficiency life and his/her private life. -I think it is a life-time process and should never be given up.
	Personal Development (4)	-It is what you have been doing in your life to develop yourself. -Improvements in your personality, career, etc. -It can be anything that a person want to learn and taste the difference. -All the necessary things that an individual believes that he/she should gain in his/her life to develop himself/herself.
	Empowering yourself (3)	-To strengthen your weakness through intentional effort. -A way for people to realize and maximize their potential. -It allows you to be more powerful.

As it can be seen from the table 2, most of the teachers (6) defined PD as lifelong/ongoing process, almost half of them (4) described it as personal development and

some of them (3) agreed that PD is empowering yourself. It can be suggested that teachers saw PD as an ongoing process of developing oneself personally and professionally to attain one's best potential in professional life. They were aware of the fact that they should develop themselves in order to keep up with their professional life.

Some excerpts of the participants are given below:

- “It includes every little thing you gain during your experiences as a teacher and the things you do to cope with problems in your teaching for me.”(P1)
- “Improvements in your personality, career, etc.” (P2)
- “Professional development is a process which helps a person / a teacher to set goals and reach somebody's potential.” (P3)
- “It is an ongoing process in a person's proficiency life and his/her private life. It is going a little of further than what you really are all the time by reading, listening, and experiencing.” (P6)
- “Professional Development is a way for people to assess their skills and qualities, consider their aims in life and set goals in order to realize and maximize their potential. It's a lifelong process.” (P7)
- “It is what you have been doing in your life to develop yourself.” (P8)

RQ 2. What are the teachers' perceptions on professional development?

Most of the teachers (7) saw PD as a necessity and most of them (5) agreed that a professional teacher increases his/her level of knowledge and becomes more knowledgeable throughout years. In other words, a professional teacher never stops learning, understands what is going on in language classes by reflecting on their own pedagogical and instructional decisions and tries to analyze his/her teaching and relationship with students and finds the most appropriate way of teaching. Only one participant stated that he had no idea about PD.

Some of the excerpts of the participants are below:

- “As the only constant in life is the change itself, everyone is supposed to assume the responsibility of going through the steps of P.D. Without P.D, individual contributions to social, academic processes, etc. would be much less.” (P5)
- “It is a must. Everybody should develop herself and change throughout the time. Because the only thing that never changes is the change itself.” (P6)
- “It is important because it helps you to identify the skills you need to set goals in life, raise your confidence, make positive and affective choices and decisions for your future, develop your personal vision and so on.” (P7)

Table 3*Teachers' perceptions on professional development*

Theme	Categories	Codes
Perceptions on Professional Development	Awareness (3)	-to set goals in order to realize potential -it helps you to identify the skills you need to set goals in life -it enlarges your vision and awareness.
	Overcome problems/burdens (1)	-It makes you understand your failures, lacks and burdens much more easily and gives you chance to overcome them.
	Have no idea (1)	-I didn't know it is important
	Become more knowledgeable (5)	-You can learn everything / something more day by day. -It makes you more experienced and -Learning new things and being delighted with it. -It helps you know more about yourself and your potential. -You will become more knowledgeable and experienced.
	Increase motivation (3)	-Improvements in motivation -It is important because it makes people motivated.
	Increase confidence (1)	-Learning new things and being delighted with it. -It helps raise confidence
	It is necessary (7)	-All the necessary things -It is a must -It is very necessary -It is important (3)/a vital part

RQ 3. What strategies do they employ for PD?

According to the findings, PD was perceived as attending to a course, workshops, seminars, webinars, etc. (7), reading books and magazines (4), doing research (1), keeping up with field literature (1), counting on observation (1), sitting for English Proficiency Exam (1).

Table 4*Teachers' strategies for professional development*

Theme	Categories	Codes
	Attending courses, seminars, workshops (7)	-Attending courses, workshops, seminars, webinars, and many more projects. -Attending courses (4) -Attending many different courses both related with profession and art -Seminars, workshops,
Activities for Professional Development (15)	Doing research (1)	-Doing research on understanding the reasons and results of treatments
	Reading books and magazines(4)	Reading articles, magazines Reading a lot (3)
	Keeping up with field literature (1)	-Trying to keep up with the field literature
	Counting on observation (1)	-Counting on my observations
	Sitting for English proficiency exam (1)	-Sitting for various English proficiency exams

Some of the excerpts of the participants are below:

- “I attend courses, workshops, seminars, webinars, and many more projects which give me the chance to improve my teaching abilities in my field of study and profession. I do research on understanding the reasons and results of treatments and impact of these studies on my students.” (P1)
- “I try to keep up with the field literature and count on my observations. Upon coming to the realization that if a method turns out to be ineffective, I seek for ways of replacing it. I search for seminars on things that appeal to me.” (P5)
- “I don't know actually many activities. I am at the beginning of my professional life. Seminars, workshops ...” (P8)

RQ 4. How do people at different career stages perceive professional development?

Considering teachers' career stages in this study, teachers at different career stages described PD in a similar way. Both teachers at the survival stage and at the mature stage described PD as a lifelong and ongoing process. Regarding to their perceptions on PD, teachers at the adjustment and mature stages perceived PD as awareness, increasing confidence, and becoming more knowledgeable. One participant in the survival stage clearly had no perception on PD.

Discussion and Conclusion

This study examined the perceptions of English language teachers on professional development and what kind of practices they employed to become more professional. The results showed that all teachers in different career stages described PD in similar ways. However, the strategies they used to become more professional differed.

It can be concluded that teachers in this study were aware that professional development was a lifelong process (Ur, 1996; Brown, 2000). This finding is similar to a number of studies. In Atay's (2006) study, participants regarded PD as a lifelong process and mentioned the necessity of being equipped with enough knowledge, skill and awareness to carry out their profession. Also, Zehir Topkaya and Çelik (2016) stated that teachers in their study were aware that they needed to improve themselves according to changes in education.

Examining the findings we can say that most of the teachers are aware of the importance and necessity of professional development and stated that they see it as a process which helps them be more knowledgeable and experienced. They also pointed out that involving in such studies can increase their motivation and confidence. Similarly, Desimone (2009) indicates that PD has a vital role in increasing teachers' development both personally and professionally, and help them improve their PD by changing and developing their talent, knowledge, perceptions and intellection.

Attending to a course, workshops, seminars, and webinars were the most used strategies by the teachers (7). Almost half of the participants expressed that reading books and magazines could contribute PD. Boyle, While and Boyle (2004) pointed out that most of the teachers participated in conferences and workshops. Ekşi (2010) also argued that "attending courses, workshops or seminars" was some of the PD activities in the Turkish context. It can be concluded that in Turkey attending courses, workshops, seminars, are offered as in-service training activities.

The results of this study revealed that 5 teachers did not read any books related to their profession. There are also similar findings in national and international literature. In a similar way, Kwakman (2003) indicated that teachers seldom follow journals or periodicals related to their field. Besides, Ekşi (2010) argued that teachers partly follow them. Zehir Topkaya and Çelik (2016) also stated that following periodicals and publications are a vital way to gain new skills and recent knowledge on alternative and more efficient methodologies and practices.

According to the results, self-evaluation, self-reflection, collaboration and cooperation with colleagues, doing teacher research were not perceived as PD activities. However, Atay

(2006), Wyatt (2010), Dikilitaş (2015) express that when teachers deal with these activities, they will become more reflective, critical, and analytical about their teaching perceptions, activities and attitudes in the class. Similarly, Kennedy (1995) pointed out that participating in in-service training program provides teachers with continuous education throughout their teaching career.

It is seen that their considering activities related to PD, attending seminars, courses workshop, etc. are most preferred activities by teachers at the survival stage. According to Burden (1982), teachers in survival and adjustment stages were more concerned about becoming more knowledgeable about practical aspects of teaching.

Only two teachers (2) in the mature stage stated that keeping up with the field, reading books and magazines, counting on observation were among their PD activities. Teachers in other stages have not expressed that they employed such activities. The teachers in the present study, showed the characteristics described by Burden. Watts (1980) also pointed out that, in the mature stage, attending traditional, formal in-service programs, etc. lose value as teachers gain mastery and maturity and they count on their observations and idea. In our study, teachers in this stage mostly stated that they favored their personal experience and reflections.

Therefore, being aware of these stages, in what way teachers develop through them, and their changing needs and perceptions can help increase the education of in-service teachers and by this way, it can affect the quality of students' learning and development in a positive way. People who are responsible for inset programs should take into consideration the characteristics of teachers in different stages and design effective training programs according to the needs of them. Besides, PD activities should be planned according to these needs.

In conclusion, it is crucial that the professional development awareness of teachers in all stages should be increased by giving them some responsibilities as early as possible. They should focus on their own development, be motivated to employ some strategies for their PD. In service teacher program designers should design programs which can support goal setting and self-regulation in teachers.

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