



## THE INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF HUMANITIES

Volume 25, Issue 4 (2018), Pages 1-111

**SPECIAL ISSUE: Teaching English as a Foreign Language**

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## Contents

**Macro and Micro Motivational Strategies Used in EFL Classrooms: A Case of Iranian EFL Teachers**

Mahmood Moradi Abbasabadi, Mohammad Shakerkhoshroud ..... 1

**A Mixed-Method Inquiry into Three Techniques of Data-gathering in Language Teacher Supervision: Video-taping, Audio-taping and Field notes**

Mohammad Nabi Karimi, Mohsen Mozaffar ..... 18

**Model, Instrument, and Procedure: Do We Need to Have Second Thoughts about the Evaluation Process of English Language Institutes?**

Jamal Zakeri, Gholam Reza Kiany, Abdollah Baradaran ..... 42

**Iranian EFL Teachers' Professional Development Activities for Teaching Literacy**

Behzad Nezakatgoo ..... 65

**Job Engagement of Iranian English Language Teachers: Examining the Role of Emotional Intelligence as a Personal Resource**

Ahmadreza Eghtesad Roudi, Hengameh Asefi ..... 77

**Subdisciplinary and Paradigmatic Impact of Metadiscourse Markers in Medical research Articles**

Hamid Allami, Yousef Bakhshizadeh Ghashti, Mohammad Reza Mozayan ..... 94

## Iranian EFL Teachers' Professional Development Activities for Teaching Literacy

Behzad Nezakatgoo<sup>1</sup>

Received: 2019/2/19

Accepted: 2019/6/5

### Abstract

The present research is an attempt to investigate Iranian EFL teachers' professional development activities for teaching literacy. In this regard, experience, gender, and major of the EFL teachers in the Iranian institutes were taken into account. 268 EFL teachers (n=268) were randomly selected from among the teachers of English teaching in different language institutes in the east and center of Tehran (N=2700), based on Krejcie and Morgan's (1970) table of sample size selection. The EFL teachers taking part in the present study received the Novice and Experienced Teacher Questionnaire (Rodríguez & McKay, 2010) based on which the researcher could diagnose if they were a novice or experienced. Then, they were asked to fill out the questionnaires of novice and experienced teacher questionnaire (Rodríguez & McKay, 2010) and teachers' professional development questionnaire (Scheerens, 2010). The data were collected and analyzed via SPSS software; version 24, and then reported and checked against the quantitative research questions of the study. The results revealed that professional development is considered significant by both novice and experienced EFL teachers. However, the more experienced ones pay more attention to the activities which could pave the way for their promotion. In this regard, the teachers with English majors showed more interest in making use of PD activities, while no significant difference was found between the male and female teachers in this regard. The findings have implications for the EFL educational context.

**Keywords:** EFL Teachers, Professional Development, Teaching Literacy

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## Introduction

The primary assumption of this study is that student teachers' judgments regarding the different types of sources of knowledge about Professional Development (PD) activities may have implications for their motivation to learn from corresponding types of sources in teacher education both in private sector and in public sector. Additionally, another assumption for this study is to suggest a PD model for the already stagnating TEFL in the public sector which is lingering far behind the scheduled program .

## Literature review

For its context-specific nature, teacher cognition may not be applied from private sector to public sector. As Fenstermacher (1994) justification of knowledge contents “still treat justification as a process of giving reasons and maintain that the validity of reasons, and the processes in which giving reason takes shape, will vary based on the contexts” (p. 182). However, beliefs about the PD activities as a source of knowledge in teachers working in private sector are crucial to learning outcomes and potentially to teaching practice in the public sector in a localized level which will be recommended with special considerations in the final chapter. Since perceptions and/or beliefs affect behaviors, it is necessary to determine teachers' attitudes regarding professional development in general, and types of PD activities in particular (Bayar, 2014). The prime objectives of the present study were to examine teachers' perceptions about PD and the extent to which their PD activities were affected by their experience, gender and major. After the Second World War, countries around the world laid more emphasis on English Language Teaching (ELT) as an important requirement of

education (Jones, 2016). Also, in countries where English is not an official language, its prominence as an international language has been widely recognized. Thus, ELT has become a part of both secondary and tertiary education system in countries in which English is acknowledged as a foreign language. In English as a Foreign Language (EFL) context, teachers face challenges because of school environments. They tend to teach the students independently from their colleagues. Sometimes teachers, especially novice ones, become overwhelmed by school bureaucracy demands, and if teachers do not receive insightful feedback or regular supervision, they might become frustrated (Murray & Christison, 2010). It is said that a better understanding of professional development activities can solve some of these problematic issues (Bailey, Curtis & Nunan, 2001).

However, some researchers (e.g., Richards & Ferrell, 2011; Shower, 2010) hold that PD just refers to those endeavors undertaken by teachers after the teacher education program, some others emphasize PD to be referred to all the activities teachers do during pre-service and in-service period to spur teachers' expertise (Craft, 1996; Johnson & Golombek 2011) .The teachers' motive to raise pedagogical assets at their disposal is the main drive behind teachers desire to improve professionally in their practice (Bailey et al., 2001). Murray and Christison (2010) contend that learning to teach in a new and efficient manner does not hinge on teacher background in terms of years of teaching and both experienced and non-experienced teachers demonstrate a high motivation to push themselves forward on their path to completion .Part of this desire to engage more in performing professionally and

competently comes from society which encourage teachers to play a critical role in the quality of delivered education in the workplace and endurance against enormity of the job and the pressure of accountability (Castle, 2006; Mushayikwa & Lubben, 2009; Olson & Craig, 2001) .

As Lange and Sims (1990) argue, through enabling teachers to continue to evolve in the adaptation and application of their art and craft is an important way to make professional development possible. Teacher learning has been put in a position synonymous with teacher change in practice which accounts for much of processes taking place in teachers' PD. Avalos (2011) claimed that "the PD of teachers is studied and presented in the relevant literature in many different ways. The premise under which this outlook is based is the fact that as teachers learn how to learn, they can transmit this insight to their students to assist them to grow." Therefore, to render an effective PD, it is argued, PD should conform to the established norms learning theories (Garet, Porter, Desimone, Birman, & Yoon, 2001). Additionally, Darling-Hammond (1996) points out that "Teacher education reformers are beginning to recognize that teachers, like their students, learn by doing activities that promote active learning provide teachers with the opportunity to understand what the new practice or approach is, and what it looks like in action "(p.5).

Of particular note to be observed for an effective PD is its context-specific feature (Garet et al., 2001). A PD activity should make sense to teachers; otherwise, teachers may quit doing it altogether. The context-specific of teachers' learning and practicing PD poses the dire need to locate the remit of more in-depth inquiries in the context of research (Iran) which to date has not been

sufficiently investigated. Although generally teachers from different strands demonstrate huge interest to PD, teachers might be resilient to the changes the program is pursuing which put forward a grave dilemma for both PD developers and administrators in the educational sector (Hammerness, Darling-Hammond, & Shulman, 2000).

Although the population of teachers is growing every year, we have a limited amount of knowledge available revolving their professions and lives (Johnston, 1997). There is little research on the kinds of professional development opportunities available to these teachers and how they make use of them during their tenure (Johnson, 2009). Faced with instant and immediate financial problems, teachers may fill their schedule with work at the expense of overlooking PD (Bolam, 2002). Having considered the socioeconomic status of gender responsibilities in Iran, one can argue that the debilitating effect of this load is targeted those who undertake more responsibilities in their family for whatever reasons. However, there is a need for caution before moving too quickly to assuming that the equation is either linear or proven. A review of the literature on PD reveals that the relationship between gender and PD activities has not received enough attention especially in the context of Iran which begs further research to broader remit in this area of PD .Teachers' PD has been a recurrent theme of teacher education research from a variety of perspectives (to name just a few, Bolam, 2000; Craft, 2000; Kelly, 2006; Mann, 2005). Yet, teacher professional learning, for its complicated nature captures both the complexity and sociocultural aspect of cognition, is a multidimensional process that entails socio-cognitive realities realized in the PD (Burbank & Kauchak, 2003; Reis-Jorge,

2007; Romano, 2006; Runhaar, 2008; Runhaar, Sanders, & Yang, 2010).

### Research questions

- 1: Is there any significant difference between the professional development of novice and experienced teachers?
- 2: Is there any significant difference between the professional development of English and non-English teachers?
- 3: Is there any significant difference between the professional development of male and female teachers?

### Method

#### Participants

Out of the huge population of EFL teachers in Tehran districts (N=2700) (<http://tehranedu.ir>), based on Krejcie and Morgan's (1970) table of sample size selection 268 EFL male and female teachers working in private English institutes were randomly selected as the main participants of the study (n=268). It is worth mentioning that the participants were in different age ranges. The participants received the Novice and Experienced Teacher Questionnaire (Rodríguez & McKay, 2010). The result of the questionnaire revealed that 167 teachers were experienced, while 101 were the novice ones. Based on the data from the demographic items, out of 167 experienced teachers, ninety-six (96) teachers enjoyed the TEFL background (48 males and 48 females), while seventy-one (71) were teaching English with a Non-TEFL background (36 males and 35 females). Also, out of 101 novice teachers, sixty-five (65) teachers enjoyed the TEFL background (32 males and 33 females), while thirty-six (36) were teaching English with a Non-TEFL background (18 males and 18 females).

### Instrumentation

The following instruments were used in the study to collect the desired data:

#### Novice and Experienced Teacher Questionnaire

This questionnaire has been developed and validated by Rodríguez and McKay (2010) and is able to specify the teachers' level of experience relatively. It consists of three scales with a total of 12 items. The Cronbach's alpha reliability index reported for this questionnaire is ( $\alpha=.72$ ), which is good reliability (Rodríguez & McKay, 2010). The minimum score is 12, and the maximum score is 60. The cut score specified is 30 to 36. It means that, in the present study, the teachers with scores below 30 were labeled as novice teachers and the ones with scores above 36 were considered as experienced ones. The teachers with scores between 30 and 36 were left out to confirm the clear-cut scoring system.

#### Teacher's Professional Development Questionnaire (PD)

Teacher's professional development (PD) is a vehicle through which teachers expand their teaching knowledge and skills. This questionnaire is a short version of Byrnes' (2009) PD scale and has been developed and validated by Scheerens (2010) based on the analysis of teachers' professional development ensued from Teaching and Learning International Survey (TALIS, 2009). PD consists of three sections; the *first part* addresses *demographic items* such as age, gender, major, educational attainment, and years of full-time teaching completed. The *second section* includes five items focused on the *attitudes and perceptions of teachers* concerning *workshops, in-service training, professional development events, staff development initiatives, and attending*

*teacher training events.* Teachers score these items on a six-point scale, ranging from 1 (disagree) to 6 (agree). The *third section* which includes ten items addresses the effectiveness of the ten-folded *PD activities* and checks how well they are for enhancing one's professional development. The validity of the scale has been supported by various studies including that of Byrnes (2009) in the U.S and Scheerens (2010) for the European Union in the large scale of 11 countries with 3 thousand teachers. "The overall reliability index reported for the scale based on Cronbach's alpha is  $\alpha=.90$ " (Scheerens, 2010, p. 125). In the present study, the Cronbach's alpha was  $\alpha=.76$ .

**Procedure**

At first 268 male and female teachers of English teaching English in different institutes in Tehran city were selected based on their teaching experience and considering convenient sampling. Then they were briefed about the study and its purposes and the

specifications of the questionnaires. In the next step, they were asked to fill out the questionnaires of novice and experienced teacher questionnaire (Rodríguez & McKay, 2010) and teachers' professional development questionnaire (Scheerens, 2010). The data were collected and analyzed via SPSS software; version 24, and then reported and checked against the research questions of the study.

**Data Analysis and Results**

A three-way analysis of variances (three-way ANOVA) was run to compare the male/female, experienced/novice English and non-English teachers' professional development to probe the last three research questions. Before discussing the results, it should be noted that the assumption of homogeneity of variances was met. The displayed in Table 1 the results of the Levene's test ( $F(7, 260) = 1.116, p = .353$ ) indicated that there were no significant differences between the groups' variances.

**Table 1. Levene's Test of Equality of Error Variances**

F	df1	df2	Sig.
1.116	7	260	.353

As displayed in Table 2; the experienced teachers ( $M = 44.92, SE = .33$ ) had higher mean on professional development than the novice teachers ( $M = 32.43, SE = .44$ ).

**Table 2. Descriptive Statistics; Professional Development by Teaching Experience**

Group	Mean	Std. Error	95% Confidence Interval	
			Lower Bound	Upper Bound
Experienced	44.928	.338	44.264	45.593
Novice	32.431	.448	31.549	33.313

The results of the three-way ANOVA ( $F(1, 260) = 496.37, p = .000, \text{partial } \eta^2 = .656$  representing a large effect size) (Table 3) indicated that the experienced teachers had a significantly higher mean on professional

development than the novice teachers. Thus, the first null-hypothesis as "there is not any significant difference between the professional development of novice and experienced teachers" was rejected.

**Table 3. Tests of Between-Subjects Effects; Professional Development by Experience, Gender, Major and their Interactions**

Source	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.	Partial Eta Squared
Exp	9232.380	1	9232.380	496.373	.000	.656
Major	3299.471	1	3299.471	177.394	.000	.406
Gender	20.239	1	20.239	1.088	.298	.004
Exp * Major	18.353	1	18.353	.987	.321	.004
Exp * Gender	.016	1	.016	.001	.977	.000
Major * Gender	20.043	1	20.043	1.078	.300	.004
Exp * Major * Gender	.948	1	.948	.051	.822	.000
Error	4835.913	260	18.600			
Total	467188.00	268				

As displayed in Table 4; the English teachers (M = 42.41, SE = .34) had higher mean on professional development than the non-English teachers (M = 34.94, SE = .44).

**Table 4. Descriptive Statistics; Professional Development by Major**

Group	Mean	Std. Error	95% Confidence Interval	
			Lower Bound	Upper Bound
English	42.415	.346	41.733	43.097
Non-English	34.944	.441	34.075	35.813

The results of the three-way ANOVA (F (1, 260) = 177.39, p = .000, partial  $\eta^2$  = .406 representing a large effect size) (Table 5) indicated that the English teachers had a significantly higher mean on professional development than the non-English teachers. Thus the second null-hypothesis as “there is

not any significant difference between the professional development of English and non-English teachers” was rejected. As displayed in Table 10; the male (M = 38.97, SE = .39) and female teachers (M = 38.38, SE = .39) had almost the same means on professional development.

**Table 5. Descriptive Statistics; Professional Development by Gender**

Group	Mean	Std. Error	95% Confidence Interval	
			Lower Bound	Upper Bound
Male	38.972	.397	38.191	39.753
Female	38.387	.397	37.606	39.168

The results of the three-way ANOVA (F (1, 260) = 1.08, p = .298, partial  $\eta^2$  = .004 representing a weak effect size) (Table 5) indicated that there was not any significant difference between the professional development of male and female teachers. Thus, the third null-hypothesis as “there is not any significant difference between the professional development of male and female teachers” was supported. Although of no concern in this study it should be noted that

all interactions were non-significant (Table 8);

- There was not any significant interaction between experience and major (F (1, 260) = .987, p = .321, partial  $\eta^2$  = .004 representing a weak effect size).
- There was not any significant interaction between experience and gender (F (1, 260) = .001, p = .977,



partial  $\eta^2 = .000$  representing a weak effect size).

- There was not any significant interaction between gender and major ( $F(1, 260) = 1.07, p = .300$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .004$  representing a weak effect size).
- There was not any significant interaction between experience and major and gender ( $F(1, 260) = .051, p$

$= .822$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .000$  representing a weak effect size).

The results displayed in Table 6 can be used to understand the lack of any significant interactions between the experience, major and gender. The English teachers had higher means than the non-English ones. The experienced teachers had higher means than the novice ones; and finally, the male and female teachers had close means on professional development.

**Table 6. Descriptive Statistics; Professional Development by Experience, Major and Gender**

Exp. Level	Major	Gender	Mean	Std. Error	95% Confidence Interval	
					Lower Bound	Upper Bound
Experienced	English	Male	48.458	.622	47.233	49.684
		Female	48.313	.622	47.087	49.538
	Non-English	Male	42.000	.719	40.585	43.415
		Female	40.943	.729	39.507	42.378
Novice	English	Male	36.375	.762	34.874	37.876
		Female	36.515	.751	35.037	37.993
	Non-English	Male	29.056	1.017	27.054	31.057
		Female	27.778	1.017	25.776	29.779

**Discussion**

The first finding of the present study revealed that experienced EFL teachers were more interested in improving their professional development (PD) activities for teaching literacy than the novice ones. These findings are in line with a good number of previous studies done in ESL and EFL contexts: Bailey et al. (2001) found that pursuing professional development for ESL teachers is bound to their professional needs and is energized by their experience. Farrell's (2008) study also showed that reflective practice plays a significant role in the professional development of teachers of adult English language learners. Wilson et al. (2009), who investigated content area teachers understanding of a content literacy framework, found that a yearlong

professional development initiative is useful for the teachers.

The present study highlighted the role of experience in the PD. In this regard, the study can take support from Beavers' (2009) research on the positive role of in-service training where teachers are looked as learners, in adult education for professional development. Similarly, Avalos' (2011) study on teacher professional development in teaching and teacher education a ten-year period revealed that PD is the discriminating factor separating a good teacher from an excellent one. Professional development is a multi-dimensional process (Black & Plowright, 2010), hence, it considers various aspects such as formal education, in-service training, experiential learning, observation of other teachers' practices, learning from social media, and official websites, books, and

covering research articles and professional literature on instruction and learning. Almost all these features were considered significant in the present study. In this respect, the study findings can take support from Çelik, Bayraktar-Çepni, and İlyas's (2013) study focused on investigating the perspectives of Turkish university-level EFL instructors about PD. Their study revealed that professional development should be considered as an ongoing need to be fulfilled. Also, the present findings are in line with DeMonte's (2013) study on high-quality professional development for teachers, which considers teacher training as the most prominent achievement to improve student learning. Another study which signifies the positive role of PD in the educational settings is Finefter-Rosenbluh's (2014) study on pluralistic and communalistic pedagogies and intellectual abilities among high school students. Teachers enjoying enough experience and interest like to develop their own abilities, then they could ignite intellectuality among their learners (Bayar, 2014). Likewise, As Finefter-Rosenbluh (2016) assert, PD not only covers the scientific, educational, and ongoing requirements of the pedagogical process but also covers the ethical predicaments of EFL teachers. The reason might lie in the fact that experience and long years of practicing lead the EFL teacher to the reality that being up to date in terms of knowledge and information is a must; something which a novice teacher may find to be important later.

The second finding of the study revealed that the teachers majoring in English were more PD-oriented in their academic behavior compared to their non-English major counterparts. Of course, the result of the interview session revealed that a lot of

non-English major teachers were highly successful. Hence, the result obtained does not ignore their interests in teaching and learning. The results of data analysis revealed that teachers with a TEFL or English background were more interested in the PD activities such as formal education, in-service training, experiential learning, observation of other teachers' practices, learning from social media, and official websites, books, and covering research articles and professional literature on instruction and learning. This finding is in line with DeMonte's (2013) study focused on high-quality professional development for teachers in the center for American progress. As he found, teachers with the related educational background are the only ones trusted and credited to work in the educational centers. Beavers' (2009) study on the implications of adult education for professional development, also asserted that professional development is better and more effectively built on the previous existing related professional knowledge.

The third finding of the study showed that the gender factor was found to be almost neutral as teachers with both genders presented almost the same interest, awareness, and willingness towards their PD. This finding can take support from some previous studies including Antoniou and Kyriakides' (2013) study entitled *a dynamic integrated approach to teacher professional development*. Likewise, they found that gender does not play any discriminating role in the impact and sustainability of the effects on improving teacher behavior and student outcomes. Lopez (2017) who has recently investigated the necessary professional development for K-12 educators in order to better accommodate their classroom space, contents that "there is a lack of information on what professional development would be

most effective in providing members of a school community with resources to accommodate their students best" (p. 12). This signifies that male and female teachers are similar in terms of their needs, wants, and requirements in benefitting from PD activities.

### **Conclusion**

The present study results revealed that professional development is considered significant by both novice and experienced EFL teachers. However, the more experienced ones pay more attention to the activities which could pave the way for their promotion. In this regard, the teachers with English majors showed more interest in making use of PD activities, while no significant difference was found between the male and female teachers in this regard. Probably, a teacher advancement program or TAP (DeMonte, 2013) system could bring together teacher evaluation and professional learning into a cohesive and coherent system to support instructional improvement. The importance of high-quality teachers on education and student achievement cannot be ignored. Hence, the impact of high-quality

teachers on student learning and achievement has been debated and the benefits accepted over the last few years by many researchers, educators, policymakers, and teachers' unions. A considerable number of research indicates a positive relationship between teacher quality and student achievement (Aitken, et al., 2013; Bayar, 2014; Bråten, 2014; Cochran-Smith & Villegas, 2015; Darling-Hammond, 2015; Finefter-Rosenbluh, 2014, 2016; Lopez, 2017; Munthe & Rogne, 2015; Orland-Barak, 2015). Furthermore, studies have shown that student achievement relies predominantly on teacher quality (Meister, 2010; Opfer & Pedder, 2011). With student learning and achievement being so greatly impacted by the quality of teaching, effective teacher development is important for any educational system to remain competitive in a global arena. Unfortunately, some researchers have discovered that pre-service teacher training programs often fall short in preparing teachers adequately for the classroom (Bayar, 2014; Lopez, 2017). Thus, leaving schools and institutions with an urgent need that can only be addressed via professional development programs.

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## فعالیت‌های توسعه حرفه‌ای معلمان زبان انگلیسی ایرانی برای سواد آموزش

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تاریخ پذیرش: ۱۳۹۸/۳/۱۵

تاریخ دریافت: ۱۳۹۷/۱۱/۳۰

### چکیده

پژوهش حاضر تلاش برای بررسی فعالیت‌های توسعه حرفه‌ای معلم‌های EFL برای آموزش سواد آموزی است. در این راستا، تجربه، جنسیت و رشته تحصیلی معلم‌های EFL در مؤسسات ایرانی مورد توجه قرار گرفت. ۲۶۸ معلم EFL به صورت تصادفی از میان معلم‌های آموزش انگلیسی در مؤسسات مختلف زبان در شرق و مرکز تهران (N = 2700) براساس جدول انتخاب حجم نمونه کرجسی و مورگان (۱۹۷۰) انتخاب شدند. معلم‌های EFL که در این مطالعه شرکت کرده بودند، پرسشنامه معلم تازه کار و با تجربه رودریگز و مکی (۲۰۱۰) را دریافت کردند که براساس آن محقق می‌تواند تشخیص دهد که آیا آنها یک تازه کار یا تجربه بوده‌اند یا خیر. سپس از آنها خواسته شد تا پرسشنامه‌های معلم تازه کار و با تجربه رودریگز و مکی (۲۰۱۰) و پرسشنامه توسعه حرفه‌ای معلم‌ها شیرینز (۲۰۱۰) را پر کنند. داده‌ها با استفاده از نرم‌افزار SPSS ورژن ۲۴ پس از جمع‌آوری تجزیه و تحلیل شدند و پس از آن گزارش شده و در برابر سؤالات پژوهش کمی تحقیق بررسی شدند. نتایج نشان داد که پیشرفت حرفه‌ای توسط معلم‌های تازه کار و با تجربه EFL قابل توجه است. با این حال، افراد با تجربه بیشتر به فعالیت‌هایی که می‌تواند راه را برای ارتقاء آنها هموار کند توجه بیشتری می‌کنند. در این راستا، معلم‌هایی که در رشته‌های انگلیسی تحصیل کرده بودند علاقه بیشتری به استفاده از فعالیت‌های پیشرفت حرفه‌ای نشان دادند، در حالی که بین معلم‌های مرد و زن در این زمینه تفاوت معنی‌داری وجود نداشت. یافته‌ها دارای پیامدهای مهمی برای زمینه آموزش EFL است.

واژه‌های کلیدی: توسعه حرفه‌ای، معلم‌های زبان انگلیسی، سواد آموزش

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