

“Listening to ELT Teachers’ Voices: Perceptions of Personal Professional Development in Relation to Their Gender, Teaching Experience and Institutions”

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Abstract

This study investigates 168 ELT (English Language Teaching) educators’ perceptions of personal professional development, and explores whether there is a difference between ELT teachers’ and academics’ perceptions according to their gender, teaching experience and institutions and the factors hindering the ELT educators’ professional development process. The subjects were randomly chosen from various regions of Turkey and a questionnaire consisting of both open-ended and close-ended questions was conducted. To analyze the quantitative data, descriptive analysis, and MANCOVA test were used. The qualitative data were analyzed by means of content analysis. Results showed that ELT educators have a strong awareness of professional development. However, in the course of time, particularly teachers’ eagerness tends to decrease. In terms of gender difference, female educators showed more sustainability to enhance their professional development. In terms of hindering factors, lack of motivation was found to be the most important factor throughout their professional development perception.

Keywords: Professional Development, Teachers’ Perceptions, Gender, Teaching Experience, Institutions, Improving Teaching.

1. Introduction

The realization of the need of learning English has brought many questions to the fore: “How can English be taught and learnt in an effective way?” and “How can ELT teachers be prepared to keep up with the rapid changes consisting of new technologies, students coming back to work, the popularity of being lifelong learners, suppliers of new higher education, newly and slowly globalizing students, increasing competition based on market, social environment that is sensitive to becoming successful in every dimension of life, and company universities for profit, virtual universities in these fields (Erdem, 2012) as a result of globalization?”. These questions have attracted researchers’ attention in the field of teacher education for the last few decades. However, one of the prominent problems of the teacher education appears to be the inadequate competency, subject and pedagogic and pedagogic-content knowledge, and practicing skills to meet the needs of 21st century classrooms.

Professional development has been regarded as a key factor to quality teaching, providing teachers with opportunities to develop themselves in their fields in order to meet the rapidly changing needs of the 21st century classrooms (Fullan & Stiegelbauer, 1991; Day, 1999; Villegas-Reimers, 2003). Even though there have been different research studies regarding professional development in other fields such as science and mathematics (Arnold, 2006 ; Shriki & Lavy, 2012; Bantwini, 2012; Casale, 2011; Bezzina, 2006; Seferoglu, 2001; O’Boyle, 2000), inadequate research into this issue has been carried out in the field of ELT in Turkey (Karaaslan, 2003; Hismanoglu, 2010; Ekşi, 2010; Yurtsever, 2012).

Batwini (2012) puts forward that the achievement of professional development is dependent on the understanding of teachers' perceptions since these perceptions can be a barrier between the new information to be learnt and the background knowledge. Different from the studies shown above, Hiep (2001) carried out a research study on ELT teachers' professional development in Vietnam. He put forward that although professional development is not a new phenomenon in the field of ELT profession for the last 30 years, this term does not attract adequate attention in Vietnam. In line with Yurtsever's study (2013), Hismanoglu (2010) conducted a study on ELT teachers' professional development. This study explores what the concept of "professional development" means from the ELT teachers' viewpoints. Also, it investigates what kinds of professional development activities ELT teachers have made use of more. The results of this study have revealed that only 30% of the participants have benefited from professional development activities in their lifelong learning processes even though most of the participants were aware of the critical role of professional development in their teaching life. The findings of the study revealed that professional activities requiring collaborative action are ignored by English language teachers, similar to Yurtsever's (2013) study.

The study aims to find answers to the research questions as follows:

1. What are English language educators' (teachers and academics) perceptions of personal professional development?
 - a. What professional activities do English language teachers consider as important for their personal professional development?
 - b. To what extent do they make use of professional development activities?
2. Do the variables gender, teaching experience and working institution cause any differences in these educators' perceptions?
3. What are the factors that hinder the ELT educators' professional development processes?

2. Method

2.1. Participants

The sampling of the study was composed of 168 English language educators working at different state schools (The Ministry of National Education, i.e. MEB) including primary schools, elementary schools, high schools and academics working at different state-run universities under the umbrella of the Council of Higher Education (YÖK) from different cities. Table 1 shows the participants' demographic profiles.

2.2. Data Collection Instrument

This study employs both qualitative and quantitative research methods. Data were gathered from the questionnaire scored in relation to a likert-type scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree) and from 1 (never) to 5 (always) with 168 English language teachers as both teachers and academics from different provinces. "The Self- Initiated Professional Development Questionnaire" was developed by Karaaslan (2003), which includes not only close-ended but only open-ended questions with four parts. To support the data gathered from the questionnaires, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 40 English language teachers who were randomly chosen among the participants.

2.3. Procedure

Data were gathered from 168 English language educators by the researchers and their colleagues at different cities in Turkey in 2013-2014 academic year. Percentages, means and frequencies of the items were calculated to reveal teachers' perceptions of professional development, the importance they give to professional development activities, the extent to which they have made use of these activities, and factors hindering their professional development. In addition, MANOVA test was used to find out whether the variables including participants' gender, teaching experience and institutions where they work have an impact on ELT educators' perceptions of professional development. Data were also collected through interviews with 40 teachers as volunteers out of 168 participants. The teachers were interviewed individually subsequent to the quantitative data collection. Interviews were tape-recorded and then transcribed.

3. Results and Discussion

The aim of the study was to explore ELT teachers' and academics' perceptions of professional development, to what extent they attach importance to professional development activities and to what extent they make use of these activities.

Table 2 shows the perceptions of teachers' and academics' views about professional development, how these two groups perceive major professional activities as critical in their careers and how frequently they employ these opportunities in the course of their teaching service. As can be seen, the perceptions of the participants appear to be very high, most of the participants state their ideas in a strong awareness ($M=4.39$). These findings are in accordance with Hismanoglu's (2010) study in the sense that the majority of the participants have positive perceptions regarding professional development.

At the same time, TDA levels of the ELT educators in terms of attaching importance to the activities were found to be high ($M=3.96$). Particularly, as for the items about "trying out new ideas or suggestions in practice" ($M=4.26$), sharing experiences and problems with colleagues" ($M=4.23$), "Reflection on own teaching" ($M=4.21$), "In-service training" ($M=4.20$) were found to be the most important activities for professional development. However, they do not tend to agree on the contribution of peer observation as for professional development even though peer observation is one of the most supportive and developmental processes in making the quality of teaching better (Richards & Farrell 2005). The underlying reason why the participants of this study have negative perceptions related to feedback can be that the concept of "observation" is often related with evaluation, especially in Turkish context and therefore has been seen as a threatening experience, as Richards and Farrell (2005, p. 85) have pointed out. Nonetheless, this study is in contrary with Hendry and Oliver's (2012) study regarding this negative perception. In their study, almost all of the participants think that peer observation is a beneficial process for their successful professional life.

As for the professional development activities that ELT educators perceive as critical to their development and to what degree they use these activities, it is seen that ELT educators often consider collaborative working and sharing experiences important. They mostly think that following development programs, in-service trainings such as workshops, seminars, and joining activities with their colleagues are important. ELT educators appear to perceive being observed by the administrators or other colleagues less important. As mentioned above, it can be due to negative perception of being observed by others. As for the frequencies of these development activities, even if they support and attach importance, employment of these activities does not provide the same values. This situation slightly influences ELT educators' tendency to follow the relevant literature on their field too. Table 2 also displays the major hindering factors which language educators encounter. According to the ELT educators, the most important factor hindering their professional development is lack of motivation ($M=4.44$), having the lowest priority in Ekşi's study (2010).

This implies that ELT educators need some new implementations considering the reasons lying behind being less motivated. Secondly, excessive workload ($M=4.35$) and strict work hours appear to be the other effective factors for their professional development. However, personal financial problems have less importance compared to the above-mentioned factors ($M=3.88$). In addition to factors hindering professional development stated in the questionnaire, the participants have added several factors impeding their professional growth. These factors can be listed as learners' lack of motivation, learners' lack of interest, learners' discipline problems, the obligation to teach students whose level is constantly beginner or elementary, the location of the institutions, the place where teachers have to live and work due to compulsory service, the education policies, mobbing, lack of communication with supervisors and administrators, having insufficient knowledge or lack of ability to use technology in the field and family problems. Figure 1 shows the perceptions of teachers' and academics' views about professional development, how these two groups perceive major professional activities as critical in their careers and how frequently they employ these opportunities in the course of their teaching service.

Given the experience years of the educators, particularly teachers, there seems certain decrease in their strong awareness about professional development, supporting existing literature (Day, 1999; Fan & Hui, 2012). As Day (1999) claimed, when teachers get older and have more than ten-year teaching experience, they may not want to leave the safety of traditional classrooms and may prefer not to take risks of 21st century classrooms. That can be a reason why they do not show much tendency towards professional development activities. As for the gender status, female educators appear to have a stronger perception of professional development in the course of time. Female educators, at the same time, attach more importance to their development compared to male educators and as their experience years increase, male educators' perceptions towards development activities begin to decrease. Female educators, appear to be more involved in these activities compared to the male educators. The results pointed out that female language instructors surpassed male language instructors regarding being involved in professional development activities.

In order to determine the influence of gender, experience, and institution on the participants' professional development perceptions and their participation in the development activities, a multi-way MANCOVA was conducted. Following this, the assumptions of the test were checked. The covariances were found to be homogenous ($p > .05$). There seems a significant difference with respect to the gender in terms of professional development perception (Wilk's Lambda (Λ) = .954, $F = 6.090$, $p < .05$). Further, differences in terms of institutions (Wilk's Lambda (Λ) = .945, $F = 4.815$, $p < .05$) and experience years (Wilk's Lambda (Λ) = .889, $F = 4.858$, $p < .05$) significantly influence the participants. As for the interview questions, almost all of the interviewees ($N = 38$) claimed that teacher development has contributed to productivity in profession.

Only two of the participants have expressed their negative feelings in regard to teacher development. The impeding factors influencing teachers' and academics' professional development, the interviewees' point of views are listed in Table 4. Teacher motivation has still been at the core of debates about professional development due to its positive impact on teachers' engagement, commitment and persistence in professional development process. Students' profile including their lack of interest and motivation, the education policy and lack of communication among colleagues come on the third rank; and, lack of academic facilities in the locations where teachers and academics live is on the fourth rank among impeding factors of professional development. Family affairs and lack of institutional support, however, have the lowest priority among other impeding factors. Although these factors do not have high ratio among other factors hindering professional development, they contribute to the ineffective professional development activities.

4. Conclusion and Implications

This study explored teachers' and academics' perceptions of professional development according to their gender, experience and working institutions. The results showed that as teachers age they become more prone to losing their interest in professional development. Also, it brought into the light that to what extent teachers and academics attach importance to professional development activities and what degree they employed these activities. The findings have unveiled that female language educators are involved in more development activities than male language educators. As for the factors hindering professional development, lack of motivation and excessive workload were found as two most important impediments. The results of the study have revealed that not only academics but also teachers have positive perceptions of professional development despite a wide spectrum of impeding factors including excessive workload, strict working hours, financial problems, lack of communication among colleagues, lack of communication with supervisors or administrators, lack of self-motivation, family problems, students' lack of motivation, students' lack of interest, lack of institutional support, education policy, and the educational background.

These findings of study pointed the intricacies of each element including students, teachers, institutions and government policy since they are related to each other. Therefore, in Turkish ELT context there is a need to ameliorate both teachers' and academics' situations in terms of impeding factors they have encountered during their professional development journey at least four levels: student-level, individual level, institutional level and governmental level, considering teachers and academicians' voices related to professional development. There may be a tailor made solution to fulfill the different needs of educators regarding their gender, working institutions and teaching experience. Otherwise, not only teachers but also academics can face the challenge of "sink or swim" in their classrooms during their professional lives, closing their doors to meet the needs of 21st century classrooms. It is seen that there is a positive relationship between teacher professional development and student learning. In other words, quality teaching is the essence of quality learning. As a consequence, teachers and academics need finely tuned professional development programs that map the pathways to successful teaching, which in turn leads to successful learning, taking a picture of the professional development situation into consideration.

5. References

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Table 1: Demographic information of ELT teachers with regard to ten variables

Components of English language teachers' demographic profile	Categories of each demographic profile component	N	Percentage %
Gender	Female	109	64.9
	Male	59	35.1
Age	20-29 years old	98	58.3
	30-39 years old	52	31
	40-49 years old	9	5.4
	50<	9	5.4
Undergraduate Area of Study	Teaching English as a Foreign Language	118	70.2
	English Language and Literature	44	26.2
	American Language and Literature	2	1.2
	Others	4	2.4
The Last Degree Completed	BA/BS Degree	120	71.4
	MA/MSc Degree	44	26.2
	PhD	4	2.4
Type of Institutions	MEB (The Minister of National Education)	85	50.6
	YÖK (The Council of Higher Education)	83	49.4
Teaching Experience	1-5 years	87	51.8
	6-10 years	49	29.2
	11-15 years	17	10.1
	16<	15	8.9
Workload	0-5 hours a week	4	2.4
	6-10 hours a week	5	3.0
	11-15 hours a week	6	3.6
	16-20 hours a week	17	10.1
	21-25 hours a week	50	29.8
	26-30 hours a week	53	31.5
	31-35 hours a week	19	11.3
	36-40 hours a week	13	7.7
	40<	1	0.6
Currently Teaching Program	PREP (Preparatory School) Program	41	24.4
	DEC (Departmental English Courses) Program	117	69.6
	Both PREP and DEC Programs	2	1.2
	Others	8	4.8
Currently Enrollment in a Program	Yes	54	32.1
	No	114	67.9
Additional Qualifications in ELT or Education in Future	Yes	88	52.4
	No	78	46.4
	Not Sure	2	1.2

Table 2: Professional Development Perceptions and Practices of ELT Educators

	M	How Important					How Often					
		% not important at all	% of little importance	% somewhat important	% important	% very important	% never	% rarely	% sometimes	% often	% always	
TDA+FREQUENCY	Trying out new ideas or suggestions in practice	4.26	0	.6	12.9	45.4	41.1	2.5	19	41.7	32.5	4.3
	Sharing experiences and problems with colleagues	4.23	.6	1.20	9.8	50.9	37.4	.6	3.1	40.5	41.7	14.1
	Reflection on own teaching	4.21	0	2.5	15.3	40.5	41.7	2.5	19.6	36.2	31.3	10.4
	In-service training	4.20	.6	1.2	14.7	43.6	39.9	9.8	27	42.9	17.2	3.1
	Following professional development programs	4.17	.6	.6	12.9	14.1	66.9	6.1	29.4	37.4	21.5	5.5
	Working on developing new materials with colleagues	4.11	1.20	3.7	11.7	49.7	33.7	4.3	31.9	38.7	17.2	8
	Working on developing techniques and activities with colleagues	4.11	1.2	3.7	11.7	49.7	33.7	6.7	30.7	39.9	17.8	4.9
	Following research literature on own field	4.02	1.8	5.5	18.4	36.8	37.4	7.4	28.8	27	23.3	13.5
	Asking for professional help from colleagues	4.01	.6	4.90	17.2	46.6	30.7	1.2	20.9	38.7	27.6	11.7
	Gathering information about one's own teaching performance	3.92	.6	7.4	19	45.4	27.6	8.6	31.9	40.5	10.4	8.6
	Teacher initiated classroom investigation	3.8	.6	3.1	32.5	42.9	20.9	14.1	32.5	35.6	17.2	.6
	Training other teachers	3.64	4.9	9.8	21.5	43.6	20.2	38	31.3	19.6	9.2	1.8
	Peer observation	3.61	.6	5.5	9.8	50.3	33.7	23.3	44.2	25.2	6.1	1.2
	Observation of classroom events by heads, and administrators	3.11	11.70	18.4	28.8	28.8	12.3	35	33.1	25.8	6.1	0
	HINDERING FACTORS	Lack of self- motivation	4.44	1.2	3.7	7.4	24.5	63.2				
Excessive work load		4.35	1.2	4.3	8.6	29.4	56.4					
Lack of institutional support for professional development		4.2	.6	6.1	12.9	32.5	47.9					
Educational background		4.07	3.1	6.7	14.1	31.9	44.2					
Lack of collaboration among colleagues		4.06	1.2	6.7	14.7	38.7	38.7					
Strict working hours		4.06	3.1	4.9	19.6	27.6	44.8					
Lack of communication among colleagues		3.93	3.1	7.4	17.2	38	34.4					
Personal financial problems		3.88	3.7	11	15.3	32.5	37.4					
Difficulty in reaching literature in the field	3.26	9.8	14.7	31.9	26.4	17.2						

Figure 1 The participants' perception views and activity tendencies in terms of the independent variables

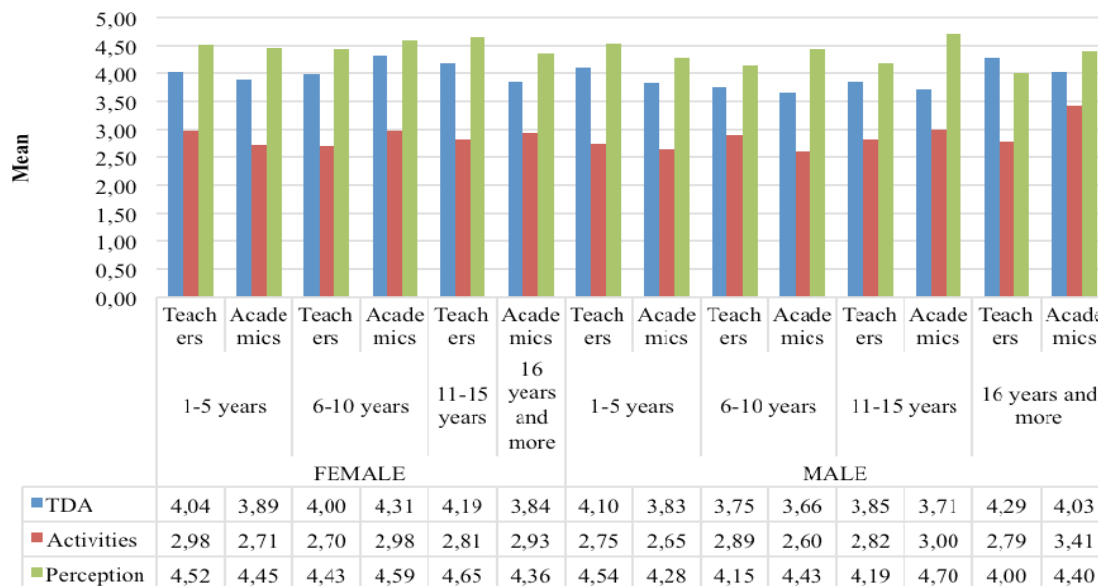


Table 3: Differences in Professional Development Perceptions in Relation to the Independent Variables

Independent Variables	Dependent Variables	Lamda	Lamda (p)	SS	df	MS	F	p	Partial Eta Squared
Corrected Model	TDA			4.205	13	.323	.977	.477	.079
	Activities			4.691	13	.361	1.577	.098	.121
	Perception			2.303	13	.177	1.694	.068	.129
Intercept	TDA			824.360	1	824.360	2489.557	.000	.944
	Activities	.015	.000	424.574	1	424.574	1855.257	.000	.926
	Perception			1018.528	1	1018.528	9738.352	.000	.985
Gender	TDA			.545	1	.545	1.647	.201	.011
	Activities	.954	.073	.030	1	.030	.132	.717	.001
	Perception			.637	1	.637	6.090	.015	.039
Experience	TDA			.072	3	.024	.073	.975	.001
	Activities	.944	.474	.292	3	.097	.426	.735	.009
	Perception			.505	3	.168	1.608	.190	.031
Institutions	TDA			.066	1	.066	.199	.656	.001
	Activities	.945	.041	.205	1	.205	.894	.346	.006
	Perception			.504	1	.504	4.815	.030	.031
Gender * Experience	TDA			2.042	3	.681	2.056	.109	.040
	Activities	.912	.136	1.345	3	.448	1.959	.123	.038
	Perception			.577	3	.192	1.839	.143	.036
Gender * Institutions	TDA			.292	1	.292	.882	.349	.006
	Activities	.990	.697	.174	1	.174	.760	.385	.005
	Perception			.005	1	.005	.052	.820	.000
Experience * Institutions	TDA			.502	3	.167	.505	.679	.010
	Activities	.889	.041	.957	3	.319	1.394	.247	.027
	Perception			1.524	3	.508	4.858	.003	.089
Gender * Experience * Institutions	TDA			.082	1	.082	.249	.618	.002
	Activities	.965	.035	.568	1	.568	2.481	.117	.016
	Perception			.105	1	.105	1.006	.318	.007

Table 4: Frequency of factors hindering professional development

Factors Hindering Professional Development	Frequency
Excessive workload	15
Lack of motivation	6
Students' profile (lack of interest, lack of motivation)	4
Turkish education policy	4
Lack of communication among colleagues	4
Financial Problems (low salary)	3
Lack of academic facilities in the location where teachers or academics live	2
Family affairs	1
Lack of institutional support	1