A Qualitative Study of Iranian EFL University Teachers' Attitude towards Professional Development

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Abstract—Within the past few years, teachers have no longer been conceived as mere transmitters of knowledge. The image of the teacher as the exclusive holder of all the information related to teaching and learning has changed dramatically. It the new context, teachers are supposed to act as transformative agents who pay attention to new aspects of their profession in the process of developing professionally as individuals. In other words, the concept of teachers' professional development (PD) has been recently viewed as a continuous process focusing on planned and systematic activities designed to trigger and enhance their growth. The current status of professional development in Iran, however, is not satisfactory. Summarizing the findings of the interview with the small group of English university teachers, this study attempted to find out the attitudes of participants to PD and discuss the constraints they faced on their way towards PD. Results indicated that a number of impeding factors have influenced the effective implementation of PD policies which need a reoriented and revitalized perspective to make them more compatible with new requirements of the present context.

Index Terms—professional development, effective policies, teachers, constraints

I. INTRODUCTION

Professional development is an important aspect of educational environment. It has been part of teaching since the early days of formal education and refers to academic development of an individual (Trehearn, 2010). Richards (1998) believes that professional development involves teachers' preparation of their own teaching methodology that considers their beliefs, experiences and perceptions of good teaching. More specifically, in Ricahrds and Farrell's words (2005) "It often involves examining different dimensions of a teacher's practice as a basis for reflective review" (p. 4).

During the past few years, many articles have been published focusing on teachers' professional learning and its impact on teacher and students changes (Avalos, 2011). For years, professional development was only considered as "staff development" or "in-service training" programs, focused on providing teachers with suitable materials and information to enhance their teaching knowledge. However, in recent years there has been a shift towards considering professional development as a long-term process including systematic plans to help teachers grow in their profession (Villegas-Reimers, 2003). Within this new paradigm, novice teachers receive support from mentors which can subsequently assists them in their problem solving situations and empower them to become reflective practitioners. Invargson (as cited in Villegas-Reimers, 2003) makes a similar distinction between the traditional system of professional development known as "in-service training" and the "standard-based" systems where those who involved in professional development play significant roles for both making decisions on major goals and assisting the manipulation of models.

Furthermore, some researchers have indicated that professional development provides all active members of a system with shared activities and responsibilities in which everyone is actively involved in the process of institute or school improvement. Grant (2008) argues that it involves creating a collegial atmosphere which uncovers potential and aptitudes of all members in a supportive context. With regard to multiple roles played by teachers including researcher, administrators or leaders, professional development encompasses the needs of both teachers and students (Light & Calkins, 2008).

Petis (as cited in Richards & Renandya, 2002) suggests that approaches to teaching, needs and interest of teachers must be continuously examined to equip them with necessary tools in their professional growth. Such conditions are rarely implemented in Iranian contexts (Sabzian, Ismail, Ismail, & Vajargah, 2013; Rastegar Haghighi Shirazi, Bagheri, Sadighi, & Yarmohammadi, 2013). What is often missing in Iran's educational system is a lack of critical approach toward professional development of teachers in different contexts, which is more noticeable in higher academic levels.

Professional development in Iran focuses on mere curriculum and teachers are neither accustomed to nor given the opportunity to reflect on their teaching curriculum. Richhart (ac cited in Trehearn, 2010) maintains that, "We need to design encounters for teachers in which they can develop their thinking abilities, increase their inclination toward thinking, and become more aware of thinking opportunities in the curriculum…" (p. 216). As such, this study attempts to examine professional development of teachers from their own perspectives by giving them opportunity to discuss the factors that hinder the process of their change and development.

Objectives of the study and research questions

As a major concern in teacher educational programs, professional development of teachers has not been examined sufficiently in educational context of Iran. Consequently, administrators and teachers do not have a right perception of this issue. It can been argued that even in situations where PD is well identified and known, there are certain barriers for its successful implementation. This study seeks to allow teachers a voice to express their opinions, assuming that it can glean new insights into the subject under study. Specifically, it provides insight into the following questions:

1. What are teachers' attitudes about professional development and how they define it in their own words?
2. What are the major obstacles teachers face on their way towards professional development?

Teacher professional development (TPD) has been studied from various perspectives. Many researchers have attempted to shed new light on its various aspects which open new a window to teachers, administrators and even learners. Several characteristics of the new perspective of professional development have been introduced by different studies. For instance, King and Newmann (2000) believe that professional development follows a "constructive" rather than a "transmission-oriented" model which refers to the fact that teachers play an active role by engaging in various tasks like teaching, assessment and reflection. It is also considered as a life-long process which takes place over time (Dudzinski, Roszmann-Millician, & Shank, 2000). Additionally, a teacher is regarded as a reflective practitioner who is assisted by professional development programs in constructing new instructional theories and practices (Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin, 1995). These authors also mention collaborative process as another feature which is attributed to professional development. Although individual work is beneficial in certain cases, fruitful outcomes can be gained when activities are done collaboratively.

Related to PD issues, a great part of the responsibility is undertaken by proper administrative policies. Trehearn (2010) believes that administrators are in charge of providing the most effective professional development plans for their teachers. Rogers and Webb (1991) maintain that, "Often teacher education focus on the set of skills to be learned and ignores the development of educational and ethical decision making, thus missing the heart of the work teachers do" (p. 176). In accordance with Rogers and Webb, Knight (2002) states that even in case of having imposed sets of policies by administrators, any PD agendas should be prioritized with teachers' needs and preferences. This is due to the fact that applicability of PD mainly relies on teachers' beliefs and values. Teachers must have a voice in their professional development and choose what to learn for their own. In this regard, the role of administrative policies is inevitable (Drago- Severson & Pinto, 2006). Administrators need to engage in an open and reflexive dialogue with their teachers as the most important factor in determining the efficacy of their implemented policies (Reeves, 2006). Furthermore, once the relationship between teachers and administrators is established, a positive attitude toward PD will be developed among teachers.

The existing literature reveals that not any learning practice results in proper development of teachers. The fundamental professional learning activities like keeping updated, experimentation, reflective practice and innovation empower teachers and allow changes more rapidly (Kwakman, 2003). Stoll, Bolam, McMahon, Wallace and Thomas (2006) state the importance of collaboration, collegiality, and shared values as cornerstones of TPD. In line with their findings, Darling-Hammond and Richardson (2009) suggest a more collaborative approach toward continuous PD rather than an individual endeavor which is specially designed for promoting positive changes in teachers' attitudes, providing a means for critical evaluation, enhancing learners' understanding and promoting collegiality. O' Hara and Pritchard (2008) also argue that activities should be interactive, collaborative and motivate participants to be constructors of knowledge rather than sole receivers of information.

Guskey (2003) believes that it is not possible to apply one approach to PD that fits all situations. He states that there are differences in school administrators, teachers and students which can in turn influence professional development processes and affect the qualities that plays a role in its effectiveness. He also spotlights self-evaluation and continuous professional development as necessary requirements for analysis of students' performance.

A number of characteristics of high-quality teacher professional development have been introduced by some researchers. Briman, Desimone, Garet, and Porter (2000) suggest some features including "content-based" professional development program that considers students prior knowledge and its relationship to the content. They further emphasize the "extended" nature of PD as a continuous process that requires substantial involvement with subject of the study and creating more opportunities for active involvement in learning. Another element is the "inquiry-based" approach that refers to the consistency between professional development and teachers' goals, standards and any reforming plan. These researchers mention inquiry-based PD as a fundamental factor that promotes ongoing meaningful learning and reflection. In another study done by King and Newmann (2000), "teacher-driven" professional development has been identified as another component highlighting the importance of responding to teachers' self-recognized needs and interest which can contribute to the development of individuals and organizations.

Dunne (2002) makes another classification for effective professional development. The first idea expresses that it should be "driven by a vision of the classroom" which means that the content of such programs must consider the interrelatedness between students' learning, academic content and pedagogical practice. Additionally, it needs to examine the relevance of any new knowledge to both teacher and students' interests. The second point promotes the idea of developing "teacher leadership" which allows teachers to have authoritative role similar to administrators. Undoubtedly, this is something assumed to be attributed to those in high power positions. However, PD can play an important role in influencing and sustaining teacher leadership to a great extent. Finally, to have its positive impact, PD must have connections to the system within which it is applied. In other words, professional development plans might not bring about any effective changes unless they have "links to the system".

Villegas-Reimers (2003) believes that professional development has an impact on teachers, students' learning and the success of educational reform. In case of teachers, PD can have a crucial influence on teachers' work especially in terms of their beliefs and behaviors. Cobb (2000) indicates that teacher practice and beliefs follow a dialectic route which can be changed in the process of classroom teaching. In addition, professional development affects the way teachers decide on their classroom goals which can subsequently direct their behaviors. In congruence with Villegas-Reimers, Borko and Putnam (as cited in Villegas-Reimers, 2003) state that PD can also play a crucial role in changing materials used by teachers which can affect students' learning positively. Students' learning can be promoted as a result of sufficient professional knowledge of teachers (Darling-Hammond, 1999). He further ascertains that "investments in teachers' knowledge and skills net greater increases in students' achievements [in the United States] than other uses of an education dollar" (p. 21). Related to the third factor, there is a reciprocal relationship between educational reform and professional development. However, some educational reforms neglect the impact of teachers and their professional development on the curriculum planning. They do not consider teachers' role helpful in implementing reforms or designing PD programs. In such situations, teachers feel resented and disrespectful. In fact, the changes that occur in the system act as obstacles which hinder teachers' growth and development. In spite of all the above findings which emphasize the importance of professional development program and its significant role in different aspects of educational system, Ur (as cited in Richards & Renandya, 2002) argue that "English teaching has not reached the level of professionalism yet" (p. 391) and more studies need to be conducted to assist teachers to obtain the proper level of professional knowledge and also implement it in their everyday teaching practice.

II. METHOD

A. Participants

Participants of the present study were 9 English faulty members of Marvdasht Azad University holding MA. or PhD. degrees in English language teaching and translation. All of them had at least eight years of experience in teaching English as a foreign language and took part in the study voluntarily to share their personal experiences on professional development of teachers.

B. Instrument

To figure out teachers' level of understanding about the phenomenon under investigation, data were collected using a structured form of interview. This form of interview was used to ensure that all interviewees were asked the same sets of questions in the same order which can also increase the reliability of the data. In fact, as stated by Lindlof and Taylor (2002) qualitative structured interview is scheduled to enhance the reliability and validity of the findings.

C. Procedures

Participants of the study were formally requested to attend the interview session which was held at the English teachers' office of Marvdasht University. The interview took place in a cite with minimal distractions. All of the teachers were interviewed separately with no time limit. They were given ample time to reflect on each research questions which were prepared in advance and express their ideas freely. It is worth mentioning that subjects of the study were assured of anonymity and confidentiality of their answers.

III. DATA ANALYSIS

All interview sessions were tape-recorded with the permission given by participants and immediately transcribed verbatim. The transcribed data were later interpreted and reduced into major and recurrent codes. The researchers used thematic analysis to develop themes and categories which were similar in meaning. After the categories had been identified, the codes were finally assigned into ten separate sets and the final themes were gained after intensive analysis and investigation.

IV. FINDINGS

After analyzing the first research question, the following categories emerged from the participants' responses.
Ambiguous nature of professional development

Participants of the study did not have a unanimous opinion of this concept. Some viewed professional development in a traditional way. It was considered as a means of increasing their competence regarding 'what' and 'how' of teaching:

"I personally think that I can develop professionally by passing some teaching courses or reading several books".

"PD means the alignment of one's own teaching with a predetermined curriculum administrated by educational authorities. It doesn't move further. My lesson plans deal with obligatory requirements (the syllabus and course book) and the sources available".

On the other hand, some teachers regarded PD as a more active process while they confessed facing certain constraints in the implementation of specific strategies in their classroom:

"To me, PD occurs when a teacher is able to match his teaching practice with learners' needs. I always take supplementary materials with me to the classroom. I feel that students need more practice for better understanding. However, this is not practical mainly because of washback effects of tests given at the end of each semester.

One of the interviewees talked about time constraint as a major barrier:

"I'm very much interested in doing extra work in the class. From my experience, I can say that never everything happens as we plan. Sometimes there is a need to adapt or even omit parts of lesson plans and adjust it to the needs of the students. However, the time allowed limits teachers' actions and decisions".

Context-bound quality of PD

Most of the participants believe that the professional development activities that yield success in foreign countries are not applicable in Iran's context:

"Teachers are not usually accustomed to adopt themselves with the latest findings and changes within professional development frameworks in other countries".

"Contextual variables that affect teaching settings are not usually embedded in professional development plans. Copying the models used in other countries, particularly the western communities, are mostly impractical, if not ineffective".

Another teacher commented:

"It's not possible to develop professionally when you teach in a context which hasn't been designed for your own students right from the beginning".

The conflict between the collaborative essence of PD and teachers' individualistic preferences

The culture of collaboration has not been given prominence by teachers. They resist anything that interferes negatively or contradicts with their classroom practices:

"I usually tend to use my own sets of principles in the class. I don't see any benefits in sharing ideas with my colleagues".

Teachers did not like to accept ideas proposed by others:

"I don't feel comfortable adopting others' ideas for my own. It usually seems subjective".

"Teachers can only share their professional learning at break times. There is no opportunity for further inquiry…and even if it is done, teachers react defensively".

The second question that focused on the barriers to the implementation of effective PD, revealed the following sets of categories:

Workshops focus on generic issues

Participants of the study did not consider workshops to be effective in their professional development:

"Most workshops I attended were run by unprofessional leaders who were not experienced enough in the subject under investigation. As a result, it wasn't possible to gain much".

Although workshops are one of the most effective forms of PD activities (Richards, Gallo, & Renandya, 2001), they have not been practical in Iran's educational context:

"Usually a large number of participants attend a workshop which limits the active involvement of the members and their equal sharing of ideas".

Chappuis, Chappuis, and Stiggins (2009) described traditional workshops as ineffective due to the large amount of content covered, unfavorable learning atmosphere and non-reflective behavior of workshops instructors. One teacher particularly mentioned that outdated topics of workshops as their major shortcoming:

"I don't think that the topics presented in workshops are relevant to current needs of teachers and students. New ideas should be incorporated to make workshops more effective".

Lack of cooperation and collegiality

Interviewees' responses revealed absence of cooperation among colleges and teachers. This is while administrators in different educational settings have recognized that improvement cannot be attained unless the element of collaboration is included within the system (Engestrom & Danielson, 2006; Lowden, 2006).

"It is important for teachers to build community of connections. Otherwise, no goals will be achieved".

"I believe, teachers can learn from one another when a culture of collaboration exists among them".

PD can help teachers work together to improve the quality of education. This requires empowering them with enough knowledge to satisfy the ever-changing needs of both educational environments and diverse groups of students (Brand, 1999; Leech & Fulton, 2008).

Unfamiliarity with technology

The role of technology has been overlooked in professional development of Iranian teachers. Participants expressed their insufficient technical knowledge as an element which hampers the way to their professional development:

"Understanding technology hasn't been recognized as a necessary requirement for teachers' development and hence, it has not been prioritized".

Another teacher mentioned:

"Comprehensive tutorials on effective use of online sources can help us develop professionally and integrate more of technology into our classes".

High costs

Teachers believe that having an effective and well-organized PD costs high. As Birman et al. (2001), stated high quality professional development needs money twice as much as the districts spend for each teacher. One teacher claimed that:

"Due to the high costs of PD, sufficient budget becomes a critical issue to deal with".

According to Trehearn (2010), materials and technological equipment are expensive and it is not necessary to make the best of available facilities.

"Unfortunately, our university doesn't use its limited resources properly, let alone implementing new technological devices or instructional materials".

Absence of correlation between teachers' knowledge and their actions in the classroom

What teachers learn does not necessarily reflect in their teaching. Participants reported their dissatisfaction with the mismatch between the acquired knowledge and their actual instructional practice:

"Teachers need to be trained in a way to meet the needs of different groups of learners in various situations. Regrettably the courses that I've passed, didn't prepared me to meet unpredictable challenges of the classroom".

"My theoretical knowledge is not applicable in real situations…this is a serious threat to professional development… the information that I have gained through years doesn't help me much".

Ineffective administrative policies

Administrative policies in Iran fail to empower teachers with effective professional development activities. Chappuis et al. (2009), argue that administrators need to be trained extensively to apply the principles of PD appropriately. One of the teachers particularly commented:

"Administrators should play the role of effective experts who find and solve the problems emerged in educational environment".

Carroll (2009) suggested a more collaborative approach provided by administrators which enables teachers to form groups. This can result in better students' learning.

"Administrative policies are seldom effective in creating the culture of collegiality and cooperation among teachers".
Other participants focused on different aspects of the issue:

"Teachers need financial support given by administrators to develop professionally".

"Enough time should be allotted to different PD programs. The training courses designed by administrators should be considered as a crucial part of teachers' working hours".

"Although some training courses are predicted for teachers to attend, most of them appeared to be ineffective".

Teachers' dedicated time to PD

Teachers do not usually show any tendency to spend time for PD beyond their teaching hours (Birman et al., 2001). One of the participants stated:

"I can hardly find time to spend on PD".

Another teacher mentioned that most PD programs are long-term and usually incorporated throughout the academic year:

"I prefer to participate in short-term professional development programs, those held during summer or at the end of semester".

The categorized codings can be summarized in the following table:

TABLE 1:
SUMMARY OF FACTORS INFLUENCING TEACHERS' PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Themes	Categories
Management issues	• Unfamiliarity with technology • High costs • Ineffective administrative policies • Teachers' dedicated time to PD
Pedagogical concerns	• Ambiguous nature of professional development • Context-bound quality of PD • The conflict between the collaborative essence of PD and teachers' individualistic preferences • Lack of cooperation and collegiality
Management/Pedagogical	• Workshops focus on generic issues • Absence of correlation between teachers' knowledge and their actions in the classroom

The relationship between the themes can be also illustrated in the following figure:
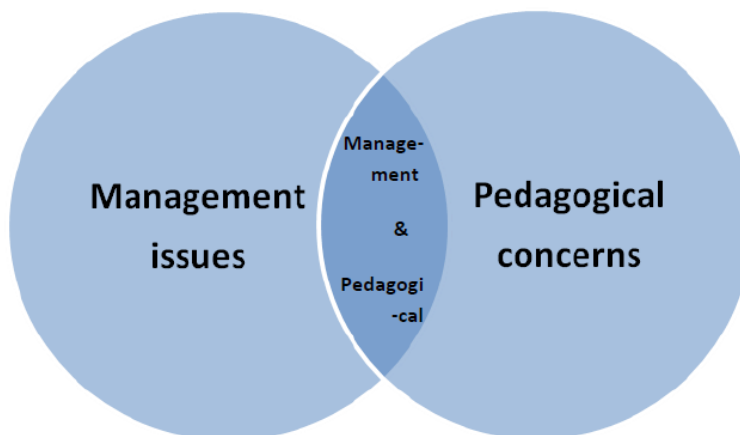

Figure 1: thematic structure that emerged from coding data

V. DISCUSSION

As indicated by the results, a few participants of the study stated prioritizing of students' needs, interests and preferences as the key qualities of good language teacher. Furthermore, they represented dominant attitude in the classroom which emerged from their own experience as teachers or students.

On the other hand, some interviewees believed that although the above mentioned factors are important for successful language teacher, there is a need to look for other ways to develop professionally. This requires showing willingness to others' views and perspectives related to the way of promoting professionally which can be achieved individually or in collaboration with a colleague. As indicate by King and Newmann (2000), "teacher learning is most likely when teachers collaborate with professional peers, both within and outside of their schools and when they gain further expertise through access to external researchers and program developers"(p. 576).

In the last few years, proper policies implemented by administrators have influenced teachers' professional development significantly (Darling-Hammond, 1996). However, this issue has not been recognized in Iran's educational context. Administrators have not realized the importance of sharing responsibilities with teachers who are considered as the most important elements within PD framework. Teachers must be encouraged and inspired to take part in professional development sessions on a continuous basis and evaluate their own understanding by sharing feedback with colleagues which can guarantee the success of PD. The findings indicated that proper administrative policies were one of the greatest desires of the participants. It is worth mentioning that administrators need to include the PD content which is in line with current needs of teachers and learners, otherwise its accountability will be under question.

Additionally, teachers' comments indicated that allotting low-budget to PD and unfamiliarity with technological advances caused certain constraints for the implementation of effective PD activities. Such issues have not been given prominence and are often ignored mistakenly in professional development activities. The traditional devices used are not updated or in line with the world innovative technology. Obviously, teachers have not been trained well enough to apply modern technological devices in their own teaching. This can be to a great extent, due to the financial problems exist in Iran's educational setting. The monetary obstacles can also affect the quality of workshops considered as an important aspect of teachers' professional development. In spite of all the problems mentioned, some workshops are still held for teachers' professional development, but they mostly underestimate teachers' thinking and consider administrators' priorities instead.

In general, a new perspective on professional development can "move teachers toward a view of teaching as a professional activity open to collective observations, study, and improvement. It invites ordinary teachers to recognize and accept the responsibility for improving not only their own practice, but the shared practice of the profession. For this new path to be traveled, however, teachers will need to open their classroom doors and, rather than evaluating each other, begin studying their practices as a professional responsibility common to all"(Hiebert, Gallimore, &Stigler, 2003, p. 56).

VI. CONCLUSION

The research questions examined teachers' attitudes towards PD as well as the barriers built up within the present context of educational system in Iran which favors the traditional perspective in teaching. Cornu and Ewing (2008) used the term "teaching practice" approach to refer to this view. Such approaches require teachers to pass certain training courses that lack any critical reflection of any kind on the learned materials. They neglect the uniqueness of each learning context. In other words, they impose pre-determined sets of packages for teachers' professional development.

Unfortunately, most of PD agendas designed for teachers come with the motto "one-size-fits-all". Furthermore, results of the study showed that teachers neither had a clear understanding of the nature of PD, nor showed strong tendency toward the incorporation of new trends in this field. Participants of the study had interesting examples to share about their experiences of PD which highlighted the fact that all the previously mentioned hindrances such as administrative policies, lack of cooperation, low budget, etc. affect teachers' professional development negatively.

Since positive changes can occur as a result of sustained and ongoing PD activities, it is highly suggested to cultivate the culture of collaboration among teachers and promote self-directed professional development which gives teachers more opportunity to improve in their profession. As Richards and Farrell (2005), stated self-directed learning can inspire teachers to explore and understand their own context of teaching more effectively.

To sum up, initial learning and training of teachers are just the beginning point of teachers' journey towards their comprehensive professional development. It is suggested that PD policy makers motivate and support teachers to use the acquired knowledge and provide them with continuous follow-up activities. This cannot be achieved unless the value of collegiality, cooperation and ongoing engagement in professional development is known to teachers.

APPENDIX

Interview Questions

A. Background Questions

► How long have you been an English teacher?

► What courses have you taught?

► What are your teaching qualifications?

B. Perceptual Questions

► Can you describe your main roles in the classroom?

► In your own words, can you describe professional development for teachers?

► How do you promote your professional development as an English teacher?

► Can we apply the PD methods used in other countries to our own context?

► Is PD a collective or individual process?

► How much time do you think should be dedicated to PD activities?

► Are you familiar with technological advances in professional development? Are they used in educational context of Iran?

► Can you name a number of obstacles you have experienced on your way to professional development?

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