

# An Investigation into the Effect of Individual Differences on Iranian EFL Teachers' Perceptions Concerning Professional Development Obstacles

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**Abstract**—The aim of this study is to examine Iranian EFL teachers' perceptions of the professional development obstacles they face during their teaching career. A total of 50 Iranian EFL teachers at different language academy within a small city of Kangan, participated in this study. The following items were found to be most highly frequent among the participants of the current study: ["Observers' visits are rare" for institutional professional development obstacles; (M= 3.91)], ["Some teachers cannot afford pursuing postgraduate studies" for self-directed professional development obstacles; (M= 4.76)], ["English language conferences in Iran are rare" for professional development obstacles related to the nature of the work; (M= 3.74)]. On the contrary, the following problems were found to be the least highly frequent ones the participants were facing during their professional development: ["Institute administration considers English less important than other languages"; (M= 3.04)], ["Some teachers always feel frustrated with most students", (M= 2.97)], ["Teaching is a type of work that rapidly becomes routine" for professional development obstacles related to the nature of the work; (M= 2.85)]. Finally, no significant difference was found in teachers' perceptions of professional development obstacles with regard to their academic qualification, ELT experience, gender, and age.

**Index Terms**—teachers' professional development, obstacles, teachers' perceptions

## I. INTRODUCTION

Living in a condition, where knowledge, technology, concepts, philosophies, almost everything is quickly transforming would make teaching a very complicated and arduous career. Keeping abreast of the continuous changes and developments is deemed to be a necessity for attaining a very high quality of teaching. Thus, ongoing professional development is a vital component in teachers' lives.

Hargreaves and Fullan (1992) point to the significance of promoting educational standards, which revolves around the issue of creating equal and sufficient chances to learn for all school students. However, "opportunities to learn also require opportunities to teach" (Woods, cited in Hargreaves and Fullan, 1992, p. 1). Consequently, EFL instructors have been required to be continually moving forward and equipping themselves with the knowledge that will enhance their ability to offer opportunities to enhance the quality of their teaching.

Examining the English-language classes, many researchers referred to a few main factors contributing to the failure of English-language teaching-and-learning: unqualified and poorly-trained teachers, poorly-motivated students, learners of mixed abilities in overly large classes, and rare chances for student exposure to English outside of classroom time (Dhanasobhon, 2006).

The final goal of education of foreign language teacher is preparing teachers with training in order to educate students carefully and guide them in helping students in future career. However, to the best of researcher knowledge no one has investigated professional development obstacles facing English language teachers in Iran. So the of the purpose of this study is an investigation into the effect of individual differences on Iranian EFL teachers' perceptions concerning professional development obstacles.

### A. Objectives of the Study

Firstly, this study aims to investigate the professional development obstacles English language teachers face. Finding out the answer to this question is of grave importance in western countries. Therefore, eliciting such data would definitely help improve the quality of teaching and learning within EFL classrooms in Iran. Secondly, it is within the scope of this study to measure if there are significant differences in teachers' perceptions in terms of the participants' gender, academic qualification, experience, as well as their age. By making sure if there is any relationship between teachers' perceptions and some of their personal attribute, the researcher can create a blueprint for other language teachers. Thirdly, having provided the findings, the researcher will suggest solutions for EFL teachers' professional development obstacles.

### B. Research Questions

In order to achieve the objective of the research the following research question was addressed.

1. What are the professional development obstacles facing language institute teachers in Iran?

It should be mentioned that language teachers might have different perceptions regarding the abovementioned research question due to their personal and individual characteristics such as one's gender, age, academic qualification, and working experience. In order to address such factors the following research questions were formulated.

2. Are there statistically significant differences in perceptions of male and female institute language teachers concerning the obstacles they face during their professional development?

3. Are there statistically significant differences in perceptions of institute language teachers, having different academic qualification (Diploma, BA, MA or higher), concerning the obstacles they face during their professional development?

4. Are there statistically significant differences in perceptions of institute language teachers, with different working experience, concerning the obstacles they face during their professional development?

5. Are there statistically significant differences in perceptions of institute language teachers, with different ages, concerning the obstacles they face during their professional development?

### C. Research Hypotheses

1. There is no statistically significant difference in perceptions of male and female institute language teachers concerning the obstacles they face during their professional development.

2. There is no statistically significant difference in perceptions of institute language teachers with different academic qualifications, (Diploma, BA, MA or higher), concerning the obstacles they face during their professional development.

3. There is no statistically significant difference in perceptions of institute language teachers with different working experience, concerning the obstacles they face during their professional development.

4. There is no statistically significant difference in perceptions of institute language teachers with different ages; concerning the obstacles they face during their professional development.

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

### Introduction

This section is a short review of researchers who had study in this subject. Finally, the problems affecting EFL teachers' professional development will be addressed.

#### Alternative perceptions of professional development

In the literature there are some alternative terms related to teachers' professional development, like self-exploration, self-appraisal and self-concept. These terms are utilized interchangeably in the related literature. Self-exploration is the term which encompasses, investigation, evaluation, and, notion of teachers on their instructional practices. Teachers' idea is pivotal to create a great understanding of the incidents that happen in the classroom. As Richert (cited in Lieberman & Miller, 1991) stated that having experience does not necessarily lead to learning about it, but that having experience and then reflecting on it does.

According to Farrell (1998), reflective instruction can benefit English language teachers in three different ways. Firstly, it helps free the teacher from impulsive and everyday and mundane behavior. Second, it permits teachers to act in a deliberate, intentional manner and avoid the "I don't know what I will do today" syndrome, and it considers teachers as educated beings.

As Reece and Walker (1997) contended, teachers can receive all kinds of help in evaluating themselves but, unless they make their own judgments, they will find all sorts of excuses why someone else's evaluation is invalid. Then the word "reflection" is necessary to create a great comprehending of the occurrences that happen in the classroom. Teachers should create about useful ways in order to attain their purposes.

#### Language learning in adults and teacher development process

Teachers have various needs and capabilities at different steps of their jobs. Therefore, comprehending adult learning is significant in order to understand the teachers' professional

#### Progression.

Knowles (cited in Rath & Katz, 1986) introduced some principles for facilitating adult learning, despite one's stages of development. One of the principles which incorporate the foundation of modern adult learning is that; adults have a deep-rooted tendencies to be self-directed, thus the role of the teacher is to involve in a process of inquiry with adult learners rather than to transfer some information to them. Another principle is that, experience is the richest source for adult learning thus, the main activity of adult education is the analysis of experience.

In addition to Knowles, Burden (cited in Rath & Katz, 1986) highlighted the significance of knowledge of teachers' personal and professional development changes because it can help teacher educators understand the needs and capabilities of instructors at various points in their jobs and serve as a basis for planning new approaches and methods to promote developmental growth.

#### Life cycle of EFL instructors

There are various methods of examine the teachers' professional period of life. However, Hargreaves and Fullan (1992) and Day (1999) agreed with the idea that there are some authoritative studies on this subject by teachers like Huberman (1989) as well as Fessler and Christensen (1992). As mentioned by Day (1999), these teachers' works suggest that teachers experience and therefore get passed five broad stages: launching a career, stabilization, new challenges and new concerns, reaching a professional plateau and disenchantment. During the first stages of their career, teachers go through easy or painful starts to their career and they show initial commitment and interest. This stage is experienced between 1-3 years of teaching experience. After this stage, teachers find commitment and feel relatively secure in their knowledge of ELT practices and subject matter. In this stabilization stage, teachers are comfortable with their identity as members of particular school or language academy community. This stage of teaching experience lasts 4-6 years. The sense of growing maturity is likely to be accompanied by experimentation and commitment but eventually to, stagnation and dissatisfaction. These may happen between 7-18 years of teaching experience. Between 19-30 years of experience teachers may exhibit more concern withholding on to what they have and subsequently show resistance to creativity and innovations. They may experience mid-life crisis and dissatisfaction to their job. On the other side of the coin, in contrast to this conservatism, teachers may feel a greater sense of confidence and self-acceptance. In the final 10-15 years of their careers teachers seem to have calmer years and experience and less involvement as they get closer to retirement. Disengagement may be experienced in 31-40 years of teaching experience. In the light of these theories, the researcher can jump to the conclusion that teachers at various stages of their careers may experience, feel, think and act differently. Thus, professional development activities should be employed and evaluated according to the teachers' needs at different phases of their careers.

### III. METHODOLOGY

#### Participants

To collect the data needed, a total of 50 ELT teachers working at different language academies in the city of Kangan, voluntarily participated in the study. According to Figure 1, there were 22 males and 28 females. In other words, nearly 44.7% of the teachers were male and 55.3% of them were females.

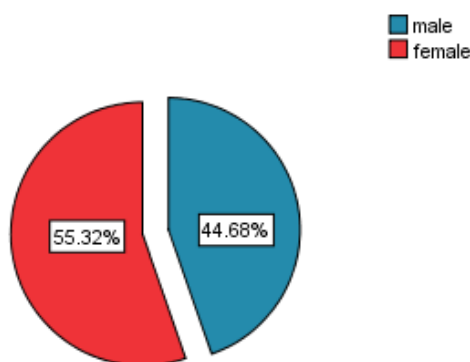


Figure 1: Percentage of teachers' gender

Moreover, as Figure 2 presents, concerning the teachers' academic qualifications, 4 teachers had a diploma [6.4%]. 35 teachers [72.3] were either BA graduates or on the verge of graduation. Moreover, a total of 11 teachers [21.3] had either a master's or PhD degree.

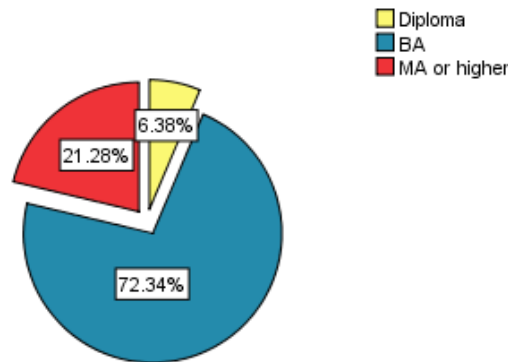


Figure 2: Percentage of teachers' academic qualifications

Regarding the ELT experience of the participants of the current study, it should be mentioned that, according to Figure 3, 12 teachers [23.4%] had 1 to 2 years of teaching English in language academies. A total of 20 teachers [40.4%] had 3 to 5 years of ELT experience. While 16 teachers [31.9%] had teaching experience of 6 to 15 years, only 2 teachers [4.3%] had ELT experience of above 15 years.

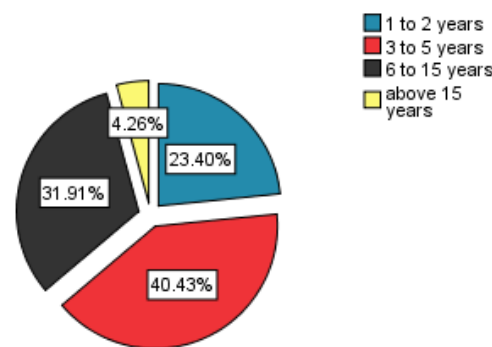


Figure 3: Percentage of teachers' ELT experience

With respect to teachers' age, it should be maintained that most of the participants, [59.6%], aged from 25 to 35. Figure 4 shows the percentage of teachers' age range.

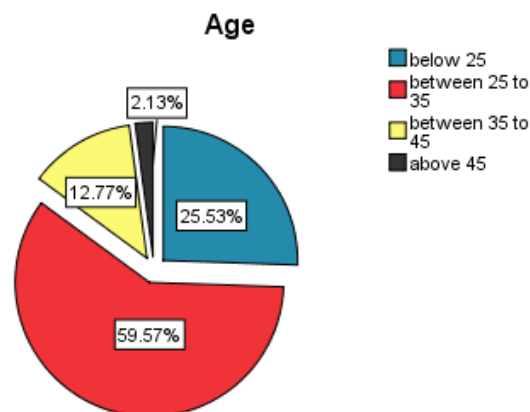


Figure 4: Teachers' age range

## Data collection

### Instrument

A questionnaire constructed by Herzallah (2011) was used in this study. This questionnaire is composed of two parts. The first part had been formed to collect demographic information about the sample's masculine, female, age, education, and the work experience. The second part had been allotted for eliciting the problems hindering institutional professional development, self-directed skilled development obstacles, and Professional development obstacles from the nature of the work. All said, the questionnaire consisted of 65 likert type statements. 3.4.1.1. Reliability of the questionnaire

The reliability reported in this study was [.75] which was a good index of reliability since it was above [.70]. However, since the study and the instrument had been used in an Arab country, there might exist some sort of variation in the reliability of the questionnaire within the context of Iran as compared with an Arab country. Therefore, before administering the questionnaire to the sample it was piloted first by giving it to 30 EFL teachers who were very similar to the sample. Cranbach alpha subsequently was run to calculate the reliability of the questionnaire. As can be noticed in Table 1, the questionnaire enjoyed acceptable level of internal consistency and therefore, it was reliable. The reason for such an interpretation is that the reliability coefficient was .734, which is a good index of reliability, since it was above .70.

TABLE 1:  
THE RELIABILITY OF THE QUESTIONNAIRE

Cronbach 's Alpha	Cronbach 's Alpha Based on Standardized Items	N of Items
.734	.807	65

### Procedure for data collection

To collect the data needed to find answer to the research questions of the current study, a total of 50 language teachers were asked to take part in the study by filling out a questionnaire constructed by Herzallah (2011). Before administering the questionnaire to the sample, a total of 30 EFL teachers, very similar to the sample, were asked to take part in the pilot study. In this phase, to ensure that Herzallah's questionnaire was a valid and reliable instrument, it was pilot tested by giving it to 30 EFL teachers. After that the researcher calculated the reliability and made sure that the instrument was still reliable in the context of Iran, it was given to 50 EFL teachers.

### Data analysis

In the first phase of the study (the pilot study), Cronbach Alpha was used to check the reliability of the instrument. In the second phase of the study, the collected data was analyzed, using various statistical techniques. First, descriptive statistics such as means and percentages was used to determine the principle professional development barriers that Iranian English language teachers are faced. Secondly, independent part of t-test was used to measure the statistical distinctions in means with respect to teachers' genders. Lastly, one way ANOVA was used to calculate the statistical differences of means between the teachers' age, knowledge, and academic skills.

## IV. RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

### Descriptive statistics for the questionnaire

Before discussing the means as well as standard deviation of the items of the questionnaire, it is necessary to provide some introductory information concerning the questionnaire used in the study. The questionnaire used in the study aimed to elicit information concerning the obstacles that English language teachers face during the process of their professional development. Since the questionnaire was originally constructed in an Arab country, certain changes should have been made within it, to make it more useful in the context of Iran. To make sure whether or not the questionnaire was still reliable after its adaptation, the researcher piloted the questionnaire by giving it to 30 EFL teachers very similar to the sample. The reliability coefficient was found to be .73, which was a good index of reliability.

In order to interpretation, each of the constructs of the questionnaire will be analyzed separately, through the provision of their means and standard deviations. In the next section, descriptive statistics for the first construct of the questionnaire will be provided.

### The difference in EFL teachers' perceptions of professional development obstacles with respect to their academic qualifications

In this section, the researcher intended to find answer to the question if there was any statistically significant difference among EFL teachers of different academic qualifications (diploma, BA, MA, PhD) concerning their perceptions of the three constructs of the professional development questionnaire, namely, institutional and self-directed professional development obstacles, as well as those related to the nature of the work. Table 2 shows the results of one-way Anova with respect to the academic qualifications of the teachers. According to Table2, there was not any significant difference between teachers; academic qualification and their perceptions of institutional professional development obstacles. The reason is that the Sig value is not less than [.05].

As can be noticed in the table below, there was no significant difference between the participants academic qualifications and their perceptions of self-directed professional development obstacles [Sig= .438] as well as those related to the nature of the work [Sig= .194], since the p value for each of the constructs of the questionnaire was not less than [.05].

TABLE2:  
THE RESULTS OF ONE WAY ANOVA FOR ACADEMIC QUALIFICATIONS

		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Institutional Professional Development Obstacles	Between Groups	30.201	5	15.101	.096	.909
	Within Groups	6944.267	45	157.824		
	Total	6974.468	50			
Self-directed Professional Development Obstacles	Between Groups	193.253	5	96.627	.841	.438
	Within Groups	5057.725	45	114.948		
	Total	5250.979	50			
Professional Development Obstacles	Between Groups	99.765	5	49.883	1.705	.194
	Within Groups	1287.341	45	29.258		
	Total	1387.106	50			

### The difference in EFL teachers' perceptions of professional development obstacles with respect to their ELT experience

Being interested in knowing if teachers' perceptions of professional development obstacles was influenced by how long language teachers were teaching English, the researcher of the current study added ELT experience as another independent variable. Table 3 shows the results of one-way ANOVA used for determining if there was any significant difference in the EFL teachers' perceptions of professional development obstacles with respect to their ELT experience.

As can be noticed in Table3, no significant differences were found in the EFL teachers' perceptions of professional development obstacles with respect to their ELT experience. The reason for such an interpretation was that the Sig value of each the constructs of the questionnaire was not less than [.05].

TABLE3:  
ONE-WAY ANOVA RESULTS FOR ELT EXPERIENCE

		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Institutional Professional Development Obstacles	Between Groups	854.033	5	284.678	2.000	.128
	Within Groups	6120.435	45	142.336		
	Total	6974.468	50			
Self-directed Professional Development Obstacles	Between Groups	587.172	5	195.724	1.805	.161
	Within Groups	4663.807	45	108.461		
	Total	5250.979	50			
Professional Development Obstacles related to the nature of the work	Between Groups	66.202	5	22.067	.718	.546
	Within Groups	1320.905	45	30.719		
	Total	1387.106	50			

### The difference between males and females in their perceptions of professional development obstacles

This section aims to examine if there is any significant difference in the perceptions of male and female EFL teachers concerning the three constructs of professional development obstacles, namely institutional and self-directed professional development obstacles, as well as those related to the nature of the work. Table 4 shows the total means of male and female EFL teachers' perceptions of institutional and self-directed professional development obstacles, as well as those related to the nature of the work.

TABLE4:  
THE TOTAL MEANS OF MALE AND FEMALE EFL TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS OF INSTITUTIONAL AND SELF-DIRECTED PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT OBSTACLES, AS WELL AS THOSE RELATED TO THE NATURE OF THE WORK.

	Gender	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Institutional Professional Development Obstacles	male	22	106.5238	10.28892	2.24523
	female	28	99.9615	13.20146	2.58902
Self-directed Professional Development Obstacles	male	22	72.5238	14.05923	3.06798
	female	28	73.4231	7.17871	1.40786
Professional Development Obstacles Related to the nature of the work	male	22	49.2381	5.49459	1.19902
	female	28	51.3077	5.41678	1.06232

Using Table4, it can be easily noticed there is a difference in the male and female teachers' total means of their perceptions of different constructs of the questionnaire. As can be seen in the above table, in terms of teachers' perceptions of institutional professional development obstacles, male teachers had a higher total mean than female teachers. The mean difference between the perceptions of the two groups was 6.56. However, as can be seen in Table 8, which shows the t-test results, there was not any significant difference between male and female EFL teachers'

perceptions of institutional professional development obstacles. The reason for reaching such an interpretation was that the p value [.069] (the value marked in red in Table5) was not less than .05.

According to Table4, the total mean of female teachers' perceptions of self-directed professional development obstacles was slightly higher than that of the male teachers. Moreover, the mean difference between the two groups was [.89]. However, according to Table4, there was not any significant difference between male and female EFL teachers' perceptions of self-directed professional development obstacles. The reason for reaching such an interpretation was that the p value [.778] (the value marked in red in Table 8) was not less than .05.

Lastly, As Table 4 shows, the total mean of female teachers' perceptions of professional development obstacles related to the nature of work was slightly higher than that of the male teachers. Moreover, the mean difference between the two groups was [2.06]. However, according to Table4, there was not any significant difference between male and female EFL teachers' perceptions of professional development obstacles related to the nature of the work.

TABLE4:  
THE T-TEST RESULTS FOR MALE AND FEMALE TEACHERS

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
									Lower	Upper
Institutional Professional Development Obstacles	Equal variances assumed	3.443	.070	1.865	48	.069	6.56	3.51	-.52	13.6
	Equal variances not assumed			1.915	47.9	.062	6.56	3.42	-.34	13.4
Self-directed Professional Development Obstacles	Equal variances assumed	1.541	.221	-.284	48	.778	-.89	3.16	-7.27	5.47
	Equal variances not assumed			-.266	46	.792	-.89	3.37	-7.81	6.01
Professional Development Obstacles related to the nature of work	Equal variances assumed	.029	.867	-1.294	48	.202	-2.06	1.59	-5.29104	1.15
	Equal variances not assumed			-1.292	44.6	.203	-2.06	1.60	-5.30088	1.16

#### The difference in EFL teachers' perceptions of professional development obstacles with regard to their age

Table 5 shows the results of one way ANOVA, determining if there was any significant difference in the perceptions of teachers with regard to their age. As can be noticed in Table5, there was no significant difference in the EFL teachers' perceptions of different categories of professional development obstacles, namely institutional and self-directed professional development problems, as well as those related to the nature of the work, with respect to their age. The reason for such an interpretation was that the p-value of each of the teachers' perception categories was not less than [.05].

TABLE5:  
THE RESULTS OF ONE-WAY ANOVA FOR THE AGE

		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Institutional Professional Development Obstacles	Between Groups	229.754	5	76.585	.488	.692
	Within Groups	6744.714	45	156.854		
	Total	6974.468	50			
Self-directed Professional Development Obstacles	Between Groups	63.062	5	21.021	.174	.913
	Within Groups	5187.917	45	120.649		
	Total	5250.979	50			
Professional Development Obstacles	Between Groups	87.178	5	29.059	.961	.420
	Within Groups	1299.929	45	30.231		
	Total	1387.106	50			

#### V. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

This study consisted of 5 research questions and 4 research hypotheses. First, it was within the scope of this study to determine the most and the least highly frequent problems that Iranian EFL teachers face during their professional development. It was found that the item "Observers' visits are rare" enjoyed the highest mean among institutional professional development obstacles; (M= 3.91). This is the indicator of the fact that the participants of this study were

of the opinion that the most important institutional problem which both hinders and discourages teachers to develop in their profession on a daily basis, is related to the number of times that their classes are observed during a semester. Since Iranian EFL teachers are observed only once in a semester, they do not even think of developing in their profession. It is, therefore, advised that EFL teachers be observed at least three times in a semester. This, in turn, would force them to improve session by session. Among self-directed professional development obstacles, the item "Some teachers cannot afford pursuing postgraduate studies" ( $M= 4.76$ ) had the highest mean. In many cases, lack of money and financial resources do prevent language teachers to pursue their postgraduate studies. This is due to the fact that Iranian EFL teachers are not financially supported. This lack of support would mostly discourage them to develop professionally. This problem can be solved in case institute managers start to raise language teachers' salary. In addition, some particular funds should be provided for teachers' pursuit of theoretical knowledge in their field, so that they feel that their efforts as language teachers are seen and valued by the administrative board in each institute. Finally, the highest mean among professional development obstacles related to the nature of the work belonged to the item "English language conferences in Iran are rare" ( $M= 3.74$ ). Unfortunately, international and national ELT conferences are not held much in the country. This might be due to the lack of attention paid to this field of study, by the educational policy makers within the country, Iran.

On the contrary, the following problems were found to be the least highly frequent ones the participants were facing during their professional development. First, among the institutional professional development obstacles, the item "Institute administration considers English less important than other languages" ( $M= 3.04$ ) enjoyed the lowest mean. This shows that most teachers believed that language institutes pay a lot of attention to English language, rather than other languages. This is obvious since, nowadays, English is considered as a lingua franca. Moreover, many Iranian try to learn English to take international tests such as IELTS and TOEFL. They mostly tend to pursue their studies in English speaking countries. Second, the lowest mean within self-directed professional development obstacles belonged to the item "Some teachers always feel frustrated with most students" ( $M= 2.97$ ). Lastly, among professional development obstacles related to the nature of the work, the lowest mean belonged to the item "Teaching is a type of work that rapidly becomes routine" ( $M= 2.85$ ).

The first research hypothesis was "There is no statistically significant difference in perceptions of institute language teachers with different academic qualifications, (Diploma, BA, MA or higher), concerning the obstacles they face during their professional development". Since, the result of one-way ANOVA for the participants' academic qualifications was not significant, it can be mentioned that the null hypothesis was confirmed. In other words, there was no significant difference in the perceptions of teachers with respect to the academic degree they hold.

The second research hypothesis was "There is no statistically significant difference in the perceptions of institute language teachers with different working experience, concerning the obstacles they face during their professional development". The second null hypothesis of this study was also confirmed, given that the result of one-way ANOVA for teachers' ELT experience was not significant, too.

The third research hypothesis was "There is no statistically significant difference in perceptions of male and female institute language teachers concerning the obstacles they face during their professional development". Like the previous hypotheses, this null hypothesis was confirmed as well, since the result of t-test was not less than [.05].

The fourth research hypothesis was "There is no statistically significant difference in perceptions of institute language teachers with different ages; concerning the obstacles they face during their professional development". This hypothesis was confirmed, too. The reason for this is that the result of one way ANOVA for participants' age was not significant.

The findings of this study were in contrast with those of Herzallah (2011), in that this study found no significant difference within teachers' perceptions of professional development obstacles with respect to their gender, ELT experience and age. It should be mentioned that Herzallah (2011) found a significant difference within teachers' perceptions of professional development obstacles with respect to their gender, ELT experience and age. However, this study was similar to Herzallah's research in that no significant difference was found within both studies, in the perceptions of teachers with respect to their academic qualification.

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