Practitioners' Evaluations of the Effectiveness of Professional Development Activities

H. Sezgi Sarac

*AkdenizUniversity, Faculty of Letters, Department of English Language and Literature
Antalya, Turkey
E-mail: sezgisarac@akdeniz.edu.tr*

ABSTRACT In this research study, 114 English language instructors working at a university in Turkey were asked to complete a survey concerning the qualities of successful professional development activities in which they were involved. The results provide a list of activities that the participants considered the most effective, such as personal experience, teaching in the classroom, participating in training sessions presented by colleagues, observing colleagues while teaching, and attending B.A., M.A., or Ph.D. courses. The activities identified as effective include receiving feedback from colleagues after in-class observations, reading source books and journals, and participating in sessions given by trainers. The activities found to be the least effective include attending conferences, receiving feedback from trainers after in-class observations, and attending certificate programs. The results suggest that making use of activities that activate practitioners' first hand experience and involvement will most probably result in an increase in effectiveness attained from professional development programs.

INTRODUCTION

Language teachers can explore and reflect upon their practice via a variety of ways (Richards and Farrell 2005; Bailey et al. 1998, 2001; Gebhard 2005; Gebhard and Oprandy 1999). One may keep journals, learn another language, exchange ideas and experiences with other teachers, or read books and articles on how to teach and learn languages effectively. During this process, institutions have a vital role in a teacher's professional development (Fieman-Nemser 2001; Grossman et al. 2001; Little 1990, 2003). Eraut (1994) distinguishes among three different professional learning contexts: academic environments, schools, and classrooms. Academic contexts enable practitioners to indulge their interest in theoretical subjects, such as the syllabus design and/or contemporary teaching methods. School context, as the name implies, indicates the organizational dimension that socializes school members via policies and procedures. The third context is the classroom, where teachers utilize their pedagogical and content knowledge, which is the knowledge base acquired over time

Address for correspondence:
Dr. H. Sezgi Sarac
Akdeniz University
Faculty of Letters, Antalya, Turkey.
Telephone:+90 (242) 310 6191
Fax: +90 (242) 310 2287
E-mail: sezgisarac@akdeniz.edu.tr

and performed as a tacit behavior (Schulman 1987). Such a knowledge base is attained overtime, consciously and unconsciously. As cited in Baptiste and Sheerer (1997), Vonk (1995) emphasizes the process-oriented nature of professional development while defining it as "…the outcome of an ongoing experiential learning process, in a given context, directed at acquiring a coherent whole of knowledge, insights, attitudes, and a repertoire of actions a teacher needs as a basis for his/her everyday practicing of the profession."

Cochran-Smith and Lytle (2001) propose that in the practices of effective professional development, the aim should not be mere 'skill transmission'; instead, the focus should be 'culture-building'. In her comprehensive analysis, Penlington (2008) propounds 'teacher-teacher dialogue' in order to enable culture-building, rather than teacher training sessions targeting to achieve a transmission of skills. In such dialogues, practitioners interchange their relevant experiences to develop their knowledge and inquire about their profession. Arikan (2004, 2006) discusses teacher education in relation to the post-method era and argues that relevant practices should question the authority, since the best method cannot be found unless tested by the practitioners. He further claims that, contrary to traditional 'skill transmission' teacher education, contemporary professional development

practices give greater importance to bottom-up structures of processing experiential knowledge.

Research on teacher education mainly focuses on how practitioners evaluate and perceive their professional development by filtering their activities and by considering their previous schooling experiences, cultural values, belief in authority, and abstract knowledge (Day et al. 1993). In relation to teacher appreciation and learning, Freeman (1991) disputes the dependent position of teachers in the conventional sense of teaching methods and argues that teacher experience and tacit knowledge about teaching that arisesfrom their lives as students should not be overlooked. In that sense, the importance of teachers' school and classroom contexts becomes obvious. Spolsky (2009) argues that teachers make up a widely heterogeneous group of individuals with different qualities stemming from their age, educational background, experience, knowledge of the language, sex, skills, and social status. In that sense, teacher beliefs and practices are naturally accepted as varied due to such fundamental differences.

Various findings on teacher development promote the importance and need for devolution of authority from administrators or trainers to teachers. Nevertheless, in their study, Kelly and Williamson (2002) compiled the common threads of professional development over 20 years of research and concluded that researchers and teacher leaders became increasingly convergent in their analyses and recommendations on the issue. According to the review, positive teacher development:

- is based on a view of teaching as intellectual work, recognizing teachers as professionals, and incorporates teachers into the planning and design of professional development;
- focuses on student learning and is assessed, at least in part, based on student learning and changes in classroom practice;
- is connected to knowledge of the content that is being taught, and is aligned with local and national content standards;
- is ongoing, and allows time for training, practice, feedback, and follow-up support for teachers to master new content and strategies and to reflect, analyze, and refine their practice;

- is practical, school-based and embedded in teacher work, yet is rooted in the knowledge base for teaching;
- is collaborative, provides opportunities for teachers to interact with peers, and establishes a learning community of which all teachers are members;
- is part of a larger coherent plan for building wide change (p. 410).

Although positive teacher development activities help practitioners develop themselves, practitioners are currently cited as the major agents who can change and improve themselves. As Shawer (2010) articulates, while some teachers continue to develop themselves beyond their pre-service training, others rarely take actions to advance their career, which therefore raises serious concerns about teacher development in terms of the opportunities provided. Research on teacher experiences and evaluations of their professional development is seriously needed to improve professional development practices at all levels of instruction as well as all around the world. Previous research in Turkey has shown that English language teachers use peer evaluation, self-observation, reflective journals, action research, and team-teaching as the most widely used professional development tasks (Genc 2012).

The related literature focuses on the process of teacher development and the kinds of goals and objectives supposed to be attained at the end of any teacher development process. Nevertheless, while designing such a procedure, teacher evaluations and perceptions on the related activities should also be regarded as the focal point. As highlighted by Turhan and Arikan (2009), examining English language teachers' opinions and beliefs via research studies on their professional development is necessary in order to improve such practices employed at Turkish universities. Besides, teacher development is still an area about which not much is known (Lunenber et al. 2014).Therefore, in this exploratory study the aim is to identify teachers' evaluations of different kinds of professional development activities in which they participate. More specifically, the research questions are as follows:

1. What types of professional development activities are found to be the most and least efficient by practitioners?

2. Is there a difference between trainer-directed or peer-directed professional activities in terms of teacher appreciation?

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This research is designed as a descriptive study. As de Vaus (2001) articulates, descriptive research studies try to answer the question 'What is going on?' Therefore, descriptive studies are fundamental to understanding all human activities in a detailed manner.

Research Sample

The participants (N=114) are all instructors of English as a foreign language (EFL). They are all Turkish practitioners and work for the same institution: the Department of Basic English at a foundation university in Ankara, Turkey. The English language instruction provided in such departments in Turkey aims to improve tertiary level learners' foreign language proficiency, and lasts for one complete academic year before students are enrolled in their first year classes at the B.A. or B.S. level departments. The participants teach general English to students at different language competency levels. In addition, they are required to attend all professional development activities planned by the administration. Some of the activities include observing their peers, participating in teacher training sessions held by trainers, and receiving feedback from peers after being observed by them in the classroom. The convenience sampling method was used to invite participants to take part in the study. These participants were selected because the descriptive data planned to be collected could best be gathered from those members of the population who would provide the researcher with the information specifically intended to be elicited. As illustrated in Table 1, among the total number of participants (N=114) contributing to the study, 98 are female and 16 are male. In terms of gender homogeneity, the number of male participants might seem insufficient; nevertheless, there are only 22 male practitioners out of 168 total teachers working for that institution, and the majority of male teachers (72.7%) participated in the data collection procedure, which is proportionate with their numerical representation in the department.

The majority of participants are between the ages of 36 and 40, and 80.7 percent of the practitioners have a Bachelor's Degree in English Language Teaching (ELT), and 19.3 percent hold a Master's Degree in ELT. Of the total participants, 8.8 percent of the group have the least experience in teaching, with 5 to 10 years. A majority of total participants, 57.9 percent, have 10 to 14 years of experience. Almost 16 percent of the participants have practiced 10 to 15 years in the profession and over 20 years of experience belongs to 17.5 percent of the total data suppliers. The list of frequencies and percentages of participants' data on sex, age, qualification, and experience can be seen in Table 1.

Table 1: Participants' background

		f	*%*
Gender	Female	98	86.0
	Male	16	14.0
Age	26-30	10	8.8
	31-35	32	28.1
	36-40	50	43.9
	41-45	22	19.3
Degree Obtained	Non-ELT dept.	2	1.8
	B.A. in ELT	90	78.9
	M.A. in ELT	22	19.3
Teaching	5-9 years	10	8.8
Experience	10-14 years	66	57.9
	15-20 years	18	15.8
	Over 20 years	20	17.5

Data Collection, Instrument, and Procedure

In order to determine EFL teachers' evaluations on professional development activities, a questionnaire with two sections was developed. In the first section, data on the participants' background was collected; the second section collected the practitioners' evaluations of the efficiency of professional development activities. For clarity, the teacher development activities were categorized in relation to the participants' evaluations of the activities' levels of effectiveness. The whole set of activities were evaluated via a Likert-type questionnaire with an ordered continuum of four categories. The categories included were 'very effective', 'effective', 'indecisive', and 'not effective'. Therefore, the set of activities evaluated as 'very effective' and 'effective' were taken into consideration to identify those that were the most effective, and the results were calculated through frequencies and percentages.

To ensure the reliability of the developed data collection tool, it was first piloted with 25 teach-

ers working for the same Department of Basic English. Having administered the questionnaire, the Cronbach's Alpha value was found to be .84, which indicated that the tool was reliable to collect data for this research within this locale. After the pilot, another group of teachers (N=114) working for the same institution completed the questionnaire. As for the internal validity of the data analytical process, two other researchers went over the statistics and the analyses of the researcher so as to make sure the structure of the "research design enables us to draw unambiguous conclusions from our results" (de Vaus 2001: 28). In terms of the external validity, the findings were discussed in comparison to the researcher's own experiences and the review of the literature were ensured. This process revealed that the results could be accepted as valid since the data revealed acceptable findings similar to the researcher's experiences and the results of other studies in the field.

FINDINGS

The first set of data gathered was categorized in terms of the most effective development activities. This group of activities included 'personal experience,' 'teaching in the classroom,' 'participating in training sessions presented by peers,' 'observing peers while teaching', and 'attending B.A., M.A., or Ph.D. courses.' These developmental activities were evaluated as both 'very effective' and 'effective' by the participants. The following set of data identified ison the effective activities 'receiving feedback from colleagues after in-class observations,' 'reading source books andjournals', and 'participating in sessions by trainers'. The least effective activities selected by the participants were 'attending conferences on ELT", 'receiving feedback from trainers after in-class observations,' and 'attending certificate programs'.

Activities Reported as Most Effective

According to the results, all of the participants (N=114) regard their own 'personal experience' as the most effective professional activity thatenables development in the profession. The nextactivity found to be effective is 'teaching in the classroom' (82.5% very effective, 17.5 % effective). Most of the teachers indicate that 'participating in training sessions presented by col-

leagues' is very effective (29.8%) and effective (54.4%). Nevertheless, 15.8 percent of the participants think that it is not effective as a developmental activity. 'Peer observation while teaching' is a very effective activity for 17.5 percent and effective for 66.7 percent of the participants, but 15.8 percent think that it is not effective. The first set of the findings can be seen in Table 2.

Table 2: The most effective professional development activities

Item	Professional development activities		f	%
1	Personal experience	Very effective	114	100
2	Classroom	Very effective	94	82.5
	teaching	Effective	20	17.5
3	Participating in	Very effective	34	29.8
	training sessions	Effective	62	54.4
	offered by peers	Not effective	18	15.8
4	Peer observation	Very effective	20	17.5
		Effective	76	66.7
		Not effective	18	15.8
5	Attending B.A.,	Very effective	20	17.5
	M.A., or Ph.D.	Effective	72	63.2
	courses	Indecisive	22	19.3

Activities Reported as Effective

Among the participants of this study, 64.9 percent (f=74) consider the feedback received from their colleagues after peer observationaseffective. Conversely, 19.3 percent of the participating teachers are indecisive and 15.8 percent indicate that this activity is not effective. The teachers indicated that reading source books or research articles is an effective activity (63.2%, f=72). On the same item, 28.1 percent of the participants are indecisive and 8.8 percent point out that it is not an effective activity in terms of professional development. Moreover, 52.6 percent (f=60) state that participating in sessions offered by teacher trainers is effective. Nevertheless, 26.3 percent areindecisive and 21 percent. According to the researcher that is not an effective activity. Table 3 illustrates the findings in frequencies and percentages.

Activities Reported as Least Effective

The last set of data from the questionnaire indicate that attending certificate programs is regarded as effective by 45.6 percent of the participants. As shown in Table 4, almost 53 percent of

Table 3: Effective professional development activities

Item	Professional development activities		f	%
6	Feedback received from colleagues after peer obser- vation	Effective	74	64.9
		Indecisive	22	19.3
		Not effective	18	15.8
7	Reading source books or research articles	Effective	72	63.2
		Indecisive	16	28.1
		Not effective	10	8.8
8	Participating in sessions offered by trainers	Effective	60	52.6
		Indecisive	30	26.3
		Not effective	24	21.1

the participants are indecisive on the same activity and 1.8 percent think that it is not effective. The participants indicate that attending conferences on foreign language teaching is 38.6 percent effective. Alternatively, 45.6 percent of the participants are indecisive on the efficiency of the same item, and 15.8 percent think that it is not effective. Receiving feedback from trainers after in-class observations is accepted by 36.8 percent of the participants as an effective activity (f=42), while 10.5 percent indicate that it is not an effective activity. It is noteworthy that 52.6 percent are indecisive about the effectiveness of receiving feedback from trainers after in-class observations.

Table 4: Least effective professional development activities

Item	Professional development activities		f	%
1	Attending certifi- cate programs	Effective	26	45.6
		Indecisive	30	52.6
		Not effective	1	1.8
2	Attending conferences on foreign language teaching	Effective	44	38.6
		Indecisive	52	45.6
		Not effective	18	15.8
3	Receiving feedback from trainers after in-class obser- vations	Effective	42	36.8
		Indecisive	60	52.7
		Not effective	12	10.5

DISCUSSION

The results suggest that making use of activities that activate practitioners' firsthand involvement and experience will most probably result in an increase in the effectiveness attained from professional development programs. However, the instructors' evaluations suggest that activities such as certificate programs, conferences, and the feedback received from teacher trainers have less effect on their professional development. As is also emphasized by the participating teachers, the professional contribution provided by the colleagues is more appreciated than that offered by the trainers. As mentioned in a study by Hismanoglu and Hismanoglu (2010), language teachers believe that teacher trainers evaluate their job performance in a judgmental manner. Besides, in terms of identifying what practitioners need in professional development, Mansour et al. (2013) indicate that there might be mismatches between teachers' and trainers' perceptions, which should lead us to question the teacher educators' roles in identifying and meeting teachers' needs of professional development. Hence, foreign language schools situated at higher education institutions should plan training programs according to the results of such studies so as to increase teachers' overall effectiveness in their own institutions.

Koc and Ozden (2013) state that both pre-service and in-service teachers are in need of working in collaboration with colleagues in order to gain support and develop professionally. Thinking of collaboration and professional development, as contemporary discussions indicate, foreign language teachers' professional development is closely related with context-specific experiences. In that sense, the results of the study make sense when its context-specific scope is realized. Considering the case specific features, such continuous training activities may lead to the validated professional teaching standards as well. While designing such training activities and programs, case and participant related factors are to be considered; such as, the teachers' sociocultural backgrounds and appropriate methods of instruction for those specific contexts (Saricoban and Oz 2014). Via tailoring programs and applications to fit well with the participant-specific variables, the efficiency of professional development and colleague collaboration can be ensured.

CONCLUSION

This study aimed to identify teachers' evaluations of different kinds of professional development activities in which they participated so as to understand the nature of the most effective activities. It was conducted with 114 EFL instructors who worked at a foundation university in

Ankara, Turkey. The first research question aimed to determine the types of professional development activities found to be the most and the least effective, and it was found that 'personal experience', 'teaching in the classroom', 'participating in training sessions presented by colleagues', 'peer observation', and 'attending B.A., M.A., or Ph.D. courses' were the most effective activities. In contrast, the ones found to be the least effective were 'attending conferences on ELT', 'receiving feedback from trainers after in-class observations', and 'attending certificate programs'. However, these results should be approached carefully since their reasons are not collected.

In the second research question, the instructors' evaluations of the differences between trainer-directed or colleague-directed professional activities were scrutinized. The results suggest that the activities directed by the practitioners' colleagues were appreciated as more effective than the trainer-directed ones. The training sessions held by the colleagues were found to be effective by 82.4 percent (29.8% very effective, 54.4% effective) of the participants; whereas, 52.6% indicated that trainer-directed sessions were effective. Besides, the feedback received from colleagues after in-class observations was regarded as more effective (64.9% effective) than the feedback provided by teacher trainers (36.8%). The participants also indicated that observing their colleagues while teaching in the classroom was among the most effective (17.5% very effective, 66.7 effective) developmental activities.

RECOMMENDATIONS

This study has two major limitations. Although the questionnaires were answered by a total number of 114 instructors, this number cannot be considered as representative of all foreign language instructors currently working both in Turkey as well as around the world. Besides, because all of the instructors were working at the same institution, the types of professional development activities in which the participants were involved were largely specific to the context of the study, although the majority of the instructors had worked in several institutions before the study took place. However, these results may be compared with those attained from similar studies whose data may come from various institutions, both in Turkey and elsewhere.

In conclusion, in spite of the limitations discussed above, the results of this study may serve as a useful guide for teacher educators, teacher trainers, and professional development programs while planning and delivering their professional development activities.

REFERENCES

Alibaba Erden H, Ozer B 2013. Identifying professional teaching standards using Rasch model analysis: The case of Northern Cyprus. *Egitim Arastirmalari- Eurasian Journal of Educational Research,* 53: 175-196.

Arikan A 2004. Professional development programs and English language instructors: A critical-post modern study. *Hacettepe University Journal of Education* ,27: 40-49.

Arikan A 2006. Post-method condition and its implications for English language teacher. *Journal of Language and Linguistic Studies,* 2(1): 1-11.

Bailey KM, Curtis A, Nunan D 1998. Undeniable insights: The collaborative us of three professional development practices. *TESOL Quarterly,* 32(3): 546-556.

Bailey KM, Curtis A, Nunan D 2001. *Pursuing Professional Development.* Boston: Heinleand Heinle.

Baptiste N, Sheerer M 1997. Negotiating the challenges of the "survival" stage of professional development. *Early Childhood Education Journal,* 24(4): 265-267.

Burns A, Richards JC (Eds.) 2009. *The Cambridge Guide to Second Language Teacher Education.* Cambridge: CUP.

Cochran-Smith M, Lytle SL 2001. Beyond certainty: Taking an inquiry stance on practice. In: A Lieberman, L Miller (Eds.): *Teachers Caught in the Action: Professional Development that Matters.* New York, NY: Teachers College Press, pp. 45-58.

Day C, Calderhead J, Denicalo P (Eds.) 1993. *Research on Teacher Thinking: Understanding Professional Development.* London: Falmer Press.

deVaus DA 2001. *Research Design in Social Research.* London: Sage.

Eraut M 1994. *Developing Professional Knowledge and Competence.* London: Falmer.

Feiman-Nemser S 2001. From preparation to practice: Designing a continuum to strengthen and sustain teaching. *Teachers College Record,* 103: 1013-1055.

Freeman D 1991. To make the tacit explicit: Teacher education, emerging discourse and conceptions of teaching. *Teaching and Teacher Education,* 7(5/6): 439-454.

Gebhard JG 2005. Teacher development through exploration: Principles, ways and examples. *TESL-EJ,* 9(2): 1-15.

Gebhard JG, Oprandy R 1999. *Language Teaching Awareness: A Guide to Exploring Beliefs and Practices.* New York, NY: CUP.

Genc ZS 2012. Professional developmentand Turkish EFL teachers: Building context-sensitive pedagogical knowledge. In: Y Bayyurt, Y Bektas-Cetinkaya (Eds.): *Research Perspectives on Teaching and*

Learning English in Turkey: Policies and Practices. Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, pp. 75-90.

Grossman PL, Wineburg S, Woolworth S 2001.Toward a theory of teacher community. *Teachers College Record,* 103: 942-1012.

Hismanoglu M, Hismanoglu S 2010. English language teachers' perceptions of educational supervision in relation to their Professional development: A case of Northern Cyprus. *Novitas-ROYAL (Research on Youth and Language),* 4(1): 16-34.

Kelly PP, Williamson MG 2002. Decentralisation of professional development: Teachers' decisions and-dilemmas. *Journal of In-Service Education,* 28(3): 409-426.

Koc SE, Ozden MY 2013. Perceptions of teachers about a web-support system as a means of technology integration. *Egitim Arastirmalari-Eurasian Journal of Educational Research,* 53/A: 221-238.

Little JW 1990. The persistence of privacy: Autonomy and initiative in teachers' professional relations. *Teachers College Record,* 91: 509-536.

Little JW 2003. Inside teacher community: Representations of classroom practice. *Teachers College Record,* 105: 913-945.

Lunenberg M, Dengerink J, Korthagen F 2014. *The Professional Teacher Educator: Roles, Behaviors, and Professional Development of Teacher Educators.* Rotterdam: Sense.

Mansour N, Alshamrani S, Aldahmash A, Alqudah B 2013. Saudi Arabian science teachers and supervisors' views of professional developmentneeds. *Egitim Arastirmalari-Eurasian Journal of Educational Research,* 51: 29-44.

Maxwell JA, Loomis DM 2003. Mixed methods design: An alternative approach. In: A Tashakkori, C Teddlie (Eds.): *Handbook of Mixed Methods in Social-and Behavioral Research.* Thousand Oaks: Sage, pp. 241-272.

Penlington C 2008. Dialogue as a catalyst for teacher-change: A conceptual analysis. *Teaching and Teacher Education,* 24(5): 1304-1316.

Richards JC, Farrell TSC 2005. *Professional Development for Language Teachers.* Cambridge: CUP.

Saricoban A, Oz H 2014. Research into pre-service English teachers' intercultural communicative competence (ICC) in Turkish context. *Anthropologist,* 18(2): 523-531.

Schulman LS 1987. Knowledge and teaching: Foundations of the new reform. *Harvard Educational Review,* 57(1): 1-22.

Shawer S 2010. Classroom-level teacher professional development and satisfaction: Teachers learn in thecontext of classroom-level curriculum development. *Professional Development in Education,* 36(4): 597-620.doi: 10.1080/19415257.2010.489802.

Spolsky B 2009. *Language Management.* Cambridge: CUP.

Turhan IE, Arikan A 2009. English language teacher development with and without a teacher trainer: ELT instructors' perceptions. *E-Journal of New World Sciences Academy,* 4(2): 410-421.