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Exploring experienced and novice teachers' perceptions about professional development activities

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Abstract

Teachers from the beginning of their career face with various kinds of students and institutions, which may result in an inevitable struggle to comply with all these challenges. Professional development programs (PDP) seem to be one of the ways for maintaining a high standard of teaching and retaining a high-quality teacher staff. The first aim of this study is to investigate which PDP (e.g. courses/workshops, education conferences or seminars, qualification program) might be much more beneficial for the teachers. The second aim is to investigate whether there are differences in the perception of PDP from the perspective of novice and experienced language teachers. For these purposes, a questionnaire adapted from Teaching and Learning International Survey (OECD, 2010) and focused group interviews were administered to English teachers. The quantitative data gathered from the questionnaire were analyzed through SPSS. Mean scores and frequencies were calculated for all quantitative responses. Also, t-test was used to measure the differences between responses of novice and experienced teachers. The qualitative data extracted from the interviews were analyzed through content analysis. The results show that both novice and experienced teachers benefited from professional development activities, but differed in the type. Also their perceptions about professional development activities did seem different between two groups of teachers. This study may serve as a tool and inspiration for future research in this field.

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1. Introduction

The teacher is the heart of classroom instruction (Galabawa, 2001). According to Rogan (2004) and Mosha (2004), the effectiveness of the teacher depends on her competence (academically and pedagogically), efficiency (ability, work load, and commitment), teaching and learning resources and methods, and support from education administrators and supervisors. Teacher professional development programs seem to provide opportunities for teachers to look for new roles, develop new instructional techniques, and improve themselves both as educators and as individuals. In Gender's (2000, as cited in Yadov, 2011) view, professional development includes formal experiences such as attending workshops, participating in professional meetings, and mentoring and informal experiences such as reading professional publications, watching television documentaries related to an academic discipline.

Numerous studies point to the effectiveness of professional development in English Language Teaching (ELT) settings. For instance, Wharton (2003) investigated the relationship between assessment criteria and the development of language teachers' research writing and knowledge. In another study, Lier (2002) reported on the remit of the teacher knowledge project which examined relations between reflective professional development, teachers' knowledge and practice, and learners' learning and its role in reflective professional development. Freeman (2004, as cited in Mann, 2005, p. 107) indicated how teacher knowledge is made from the teacher's experience as a learner, experiences as a teacher, understanding of theory and research, continuing reflection on learners and their learning processes, and soliciting and acting on information from learners about their own learning. In another study, Yadav (2011) revealed how blogging as a professional development program can help, enhance, and enrich English language teachers and learners to develop themselves as ELT professionals. A research by Komba and Nkumbi (2008) showed that the majority of teachers perceived professional development as being important because it improves the teacher professionally, academically and technically.

ELT departments strive to train their teacher nominees so that they could help learners become competent and skilled, understand what they are doing and communicate effectively. Because of the fact that teachers face with various kinds of learner groups, institutions, programs, curricula, materials, policies, and the socio-cultural environment from the beginning of their careers, there is an inevitable process of complying with all these challenges. Professional development programs seem to be one of the ways for maintaining a high standard of teaching and retaining a high-quality teacher staff. These programs designed to meet the needs and desires of teachers (experienced and novice) have the potential to guide teachers into novel and challenging roles; expose them to new information in the field; and guide them into fruitful self-reflection, cooperation with colleagues, and researches within their own classrooms. Appropriate areas of focus for these programs include action research; mentoring, coaching, and peer observation; and opportunities for reflection that may be done or delivered individually, in pairs, or in groups. Knapp (2003) points out that professional development is a critical link to improved teaching.

It has been established that experienced teachers differ from novice teachers in their knowledge, skills, and beliefs (Rodríguez & McKay, 2010). Therefore, it may be concluded that they also differ from novice teachers in their professional development needs. Novice teachers are defined as those with little or no mastery experience. They are often student teachers or teachers who have less than 2 years of teaching experience (Gatbonton, 2008). The identification of experienced teachers is more complex but they can be identified according to the number of years they have taught. For example, Gatbonton (1999, as cited in Rodríguez & McKay, 2010), pointed out that experienced teachers are those who have approximately 5 years or more of classroom experience. Richards and Farrell (2005) also distinguished experienced teachers from novice teachers according to some characteristics that they share. They say that experienced teachers have:

- a rich and elaborate knowledge base,
- ability to integrate and use different kinds of knowledge,
- ability to make intuitive judgments based on past experience,
- desire to investigate and solve a wide range of teaching problems,
- deeper understanding of students' needs and student learning,
- awareness of instructional objectives to support teaching,
- better understanding and use of language learning strategies,
- greater awareness of the learning context,
- greater fluidity and automaticity in teaching, and

- greater efficiency and effectiveness in lesson planning (p. 7).

Hence, the first aim of this study is to investigate which professional development activities might be much more beneficial for the teachers. The second aim is to investigate whether there are differences in the perception of teacher development activities from the side of novice and experienced teachers.

2. Method

2.1. Participants and procedures

Sixty male and female English teachers (aged 22 to 62) from one of the institutions in Adana participated in this study. Of these 60 teachers 2 of them had PhD degree, 4 of them had MA degree, and 54 had BA degree. Table 1 shows the sample of the study by years of experience. As this shows, over half the samples have more than five years' experience. In this study teachers who had more than five years of experience were considered as experienced teachers and teachers with less than five years were considered as novice teachers. Accordingly, 32 and 28 are experienced and novice teachers, respectively.

Table 1. The sample of the study by experience

Experience	N	%	Male	Female
First year	6	10	0	6
1-2 years	9	15	1	8
3-5 years	13	21.66	1	12
6-10 years	5	8.33	3	2
11-15 years	18	30	6	12
16-20 years	5	8.33	4	1
More than 20 years	4	6.66	3	1
Total	60	100	16	42

This study adopted a quantitative approach and used a questionnaire adapted from Teaching and Learning International Survey (OECD, 2010) and administered to all the English teachers of the institution. It consisted of two parts. In the first part, the participants were asked about their background information such as gender, age, and experience, while the second part elicited their views on professional development. They were first given nine professional development activities and they were asked to say whether they have participated in these activities during the last year or not, and then if the answer was yes, they were asked to provide the degree of the impact of the professional development activities. Four possible answers were provided for this part: no impact, a small impact, a moderate impact, and a large impact. Then, the teachers were asked to say how often they do the professional development activities. In this part of the questionnaire twelve professional development activities were given and six answers were provided including: never, less than once per year, once per year, 3-4 times per year, monthly, and weekly. After collecting questionnaire data, focused group interviews were administered. Twelve teachers were randomly chosen from the total group of English teachers who answered the questionnaire and put into focused groups. The participants of the study were divided into two groups of 6 participants (6 experienced teachers and 6 novice teachers) for focused group discussion. These participants answered to open-ended questions. The first question was "which professional development programs were much more beneficial for the teachers?". The second question was "why these professional development activities were beneficial or not?". These focused group interviews were audiotaped and transcribed and content analysis was used in analyzing them.

The questionnaires were collected and the data were then entered into SPSS, a statistical package. Mean scores and frequencies were calculated for the quantitative responses. *T*-test was used to measure the differences between the responses of experienced and novice teachers. The interviews were analyzed thematically.

Through the questionnaire and interview, it was investigated which professional development programs might be much more beneficial for the teachers and also it was investigated whether there were differences in the perception of teacher development activities from the side of novice and experienced teachers.

3. Results

The themes emerged out of the focused group interviews highly correlated with the questionnaire data. The novice and the experienced teachers differed in their preferences regarding the development activities. Table 4 lists the nine items included in the first part of the professional development activities questionnaire. Teachers were asked to say whether they have participated in these activities during the last year or not, and then if the answer was yes, they were asked to provide the degree of the impact of the professional development activities, each is based on a score of 1 for no impact, 2 for a small impact, 3 for moderate impact, and 4 for a large impact. In order to determine the differences between the responses of experienced and novice teachers, the scores obtained from the professional development activities (part 1) were submitted to an independent-samples *t*-test. Table 2 represents the means and standard deviations and Table 3 displays the results of the independent-samples *t*-test analysis for the professional development activities (part 1). This analysis yielded a significant differences between the responses of experienced and novice teachers, $t(5.52) = 3.10, p < .003$.

Table 2. Means and standard deviation for the professional development activities (part 1)

Group	n	M	SD
Experienced	32	22.59	2.67
Novice	28	20.60	2.21

Table 3. The results of independent samples t-test for the professional development activities(part 2)

Group	t-test for Equality				-
	Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means		
	F	ptdf	p (2-tailed)		
Equal variances assumed					
not assumed	5.52	.29*	3.10	58	.003**

To pinpoint these differences in accordance with the professional development activities (part 1), the frequency of the responses of experienced and novice teachers are presented in Table 4. As shown in Table 4, the four frequent activities indicating a larger impact on teachers' development among the experienced and novice teachers are:

Experienced teachers:

- Mentoring and/or peer observation and coaching, as part of a formal school arrangement.
- Reading professional literature (e.g. journals, evidence-based papers, thesis papers).
- Educational conferences or seminars (where teachers and/or researchers present their research results and discuss educational problems).
- Observation visits to other schools/institutes.

Novice teachers:

- Courses/workshops (e.g. on subject matter or methods and/or other education-related topics).
- Participation in a network of teachers formed specifically for the professional development of teachers.
- Reading professional literature (e.g. journals, evidence-based papers, thesis papers).
- Engaging in informal dialogue with their colleagues on how to improve their teaching.

Table 4. Teachers' participation in professional development activities (part 1)

Activity	Frequency							
	Experienced (N=32)				Novice (N=28)			
	1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4
1. Courses/workshops (e.g. on subject matter or methods and/or other education-related topics)...	15	11	5	1	2	5	9	12
2. Education conferences or seminars (where teachers and/or researchers present their research results and discuss educational problems)...	1	6	12	13	12	11	3	2
3. Qualification programme (e.g. a degree programme)...	15	9	4	4	13	11	3	1
4. Observation visits to other schools/institutes...	2	7	15	8	17	9	1	1
5. Participation in a network of teachers formed specifically for the professional development of teachers...	11	10	8	3	3	3	11	11
6. Individual or collaborative research on a topic of interest to you professionally...	3	16	9	4	13	11	3	1
7. Mentoring and/or peer observation and coaching, as part of a formal school arrangement...	2	3	9	18	16	10	2	4
8. Reading professional literature (e.g. journals, evidence-based papers, thesis papers) ...	4	3	12	13	3	3	12	10
9. Engaging in informal dialogue with your colleagues on how to improve your teaching ...	12	13	4	3	1	4	13	10

1= no impact, 2= a small impact, 3= a moderate impact, 4= a large impact.

Table 7 presents the twelve items included in the second part of the professional development activities questionnaire. Teachers were asked to indicate how often they follow these activities, indicating they were done "never, less than per year, 3-4 times per year, monthly, and weekly which are displayed as 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, respectively, in analyses". In order to show the differences between the responses of experienced and novice teachers, independent-samples *t*-test was run on the scores obtained from the professional development activities (part 2). Table 5 displays the means and standard deviations and Table 6 shows the results of the independent-samples *t*-test analysis for the professional development activities (part 2). The results pertaining to this analysis, as shown in Table 6, revealed a significant difference between the responses of experienced and novice teachers, $t(.53) = 3.47, p < .001$.

Table 5. Means and standard deviation for the professional development activities (part 2)

Group	n	M	SD
Experienced	32	32.81	4.29
Novice	28	28.67	4.90

Table 6. The results of independent samples t-test for the professional development activities(part 2)

Group	Levene's Test for		t-test for Equality		
	Equality of Variances of means		-		
	<i>F</i>	<i>ptdfp</i>	<i>(2-tailed)</i>		
Equal variances assumed					
not assumed	.53	.46*	3.47	58	.001**

The frequency of doing the professional development activities (part 2) in the course of time by experienced and novice teachers are shown in Table 7. As shown in Table 7, the three instances of the most occurring activities among the experienced and novice teachers as time go by are:

Experienced teachers:

- Discuss and coordinate homework practice across subjects.
- Exchange teaching materials with colleagues.
- Discuss and decide on the selection of instructional media (e.g. textbooks, exercise books).

Novice teachers:

- Exchange teaching materials with colleagues.
- Ensure common standards in evaluations for assessing student progress.
- Discuss and decide on the selection of instructional media (e.g. textbooks, exercise books).

Table 7. Teachers' participation in professional development activities (part 2)

Activity	Frequency											
	Experienced (N=32)						Novice (N=28)					
	1	2	3	4	5	6	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Attend staff meetings to discuss the vision and mission of the school/institute...	1	9	13	9	0	0	2	14	9	3	0	0
2. Develop a school/institute curriculum or part of it...	1	14	14	3	0	0	2	12	9	5	0	0
3. Discuss and decide on the selection of instructional media (e.g. textbooks, exercise books) ...	0	6	9	12	3	2	0	13	10	3	1	1
4. Exchange teaching materials with colleagues ...	0	3	3	11	4	11	0	1	4	12	2	9
5. Attend team conferences for the age group you teach ...	4	4	5	6	7	6	10	7	4	3	2	2
6. Ensure common standards in evaluations for assessing student progress ...	2	6	12	9	0	2	3	1	11	9	0	4
7. Engage in discussion about the learning development of specific students ...	0	8	9	9	5	1	1	10	11	4	2	0
8. Teach jointly as a team in the same class ...	24	4	2	0	0	2	23	3	1	0	0	1
9. Take part in professional learning activities (e.g. team supervision) ...	20	2	1	7	1	1	19	2	0	7	0	0
10. Observe other teachers' classes and provide feedback...	24	4	4	0	0	0	23	2	3	0	0	0
11. Engage in joint activities across different classes and age groups (e.g. projects) ...	22	6	4	0	0	0	21	6	1	0	0	0

12. Discuss and coordinate homework practice across subjects .	16	1	1	14	0	0	21	1	0	6	0	0
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1= never, 2= less than once per year, 3= once per year, 4= 3-4 times per year, 5= monthly, 6= weekly.

4. Discussion and conclusion

The research questions of this study were organized as "which professional development activities might be much more beneficial for the teachers?" Also "whether there are differences in the perception of teacher development activities from the side of novice and experienced teachers?" Based on the results of this study, it was revealed that mentoring and/or peer observation and coaching, reading professional literature, education conferences or seminars, and observation visits to other schools/institutes respectively were the activities that most experienced teachers participated in and found beneficial in improving their teaching. In other hand, novice teachers took part mostly in courses/workshops; network of teachers formed particularly for the professional development of teachers, read professional literature, and engaged in informal dialogue with their colleagues on how to improve their teaching. They found these professional development activities useful. Also it was revealed from the results that the most occurring activities among the experienced teachers were: discussing and coordinating homework practice across subjects, exchanging teaching materials with colleagues, and discussing and deciding on the selection of instructional media. But frequently used activities by novice teachers were: exchanging teaching materials with colleagues, ensuring common standards in evaluations for assessing student progress, and discussing and deciding on the selection of instructional media.

In order to explore the positive effect of professional development activities, the basic and important features of it should be explained. Teacher professional development provides opportunities for teachers to discover new roles, develop new instructional techniques and methods of teaching, refine their practice and develop themselves both professionally and personally. When considering the use of the professional development activities in language teaching environment, it can be seen that the professional development needs and desires of experienced and novice teachers differ. Richards and Farrell (2005), point out that experienced teachers tend to share the following characteristics, setting them apart from novice teachers: a rich knowledge base, ability to integrate and utilize different kinds of knowledge, ability to make intuitive judgments based on past experiences, desire to study and solve a wide range of teaching problems, deeper understanding of students' needs and student learning, awareness of instructional goals to support teaching, better understanding and use of language learning strategies, greater awareness of the learning context, greater fluidity and automaticity in teaching, and greater efficiency and effectiveness in lesson planning (p.7).

Results from the present study were consistent with some previous research findings (Komba & Nkumbi, 2008; Lier, 2002; Wharton, 2003; Yadav, 2011) which showed that teachers benefited from professional development activities both as educators and as individuals.

The findings of this study could have implications for all language teachers who want to benefit from the professional development activities and develop themselves in order to train future language teachers. Further research, however, could more rigorously explore the effects of professional development activities. School administrators and higher educational council may design inset programs in order to foster teachers' capabilities. Collaborative research or project work should be supported by school administrators to enhance teachers', especially novice teachers' skills and strategies in their professional life. Also teachers themselves both novice and experienced should be open to embrace the latest development in the field of teaching English.

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