Professional development among English language teachers: challenges and recommendations for practice

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ABSTRACT

Professional development of language teachers is one major measure to ensure that teachers remain updated and avoid the risk or leaving the profession. Not all teachers, however, attend professional development (PD) workshops or engage in such activities for the sake of developing professionally. Some teachers attend PD courses on a routine basis with little knowledge of what competencies they are expected to gain as a result, and simply because taking part in such programmes is an institutional requirement. To explore the type of PD activities English teachers in Iran participate in and also to understand the motivations behind their participation, the researchers interviewed 24 English teachers (with the age range of 24–50) working at private language institutes and public high schools. The study found that public school teachers were engaged in very few PD activities, and the type of PD activities private teachers followed ranged from consulting online courses to watching educational videos to reading ELT textbooks. The motivations for taking part in PD activities ranged from ‘having no motivation’ to ‘promoting my English’ to ‘being able to teach at university’. Further results and implications for teacher education in Iran and beyond are discussed in the paper.

1. Introduction

As Burns and Richards (2009, 1) point out, the English language skills of the citizens of a country are vital for its development and active participation in the global economy and ‘central to this enterprise are English teaching and English language teachers.’ Freeman et al. (2015) estimate that there are currently about 15 million English teachers worldwide and that most of these are not native speakers of the language they teach.

These observations imply that English teachers worldwide play a seminal role in the development of English competence among its learners, and for teachers to be able to deliver competent speakers, their own professional competence is also a priority. Although teachers are expected to be suitably qualified at the time of their recruitment, the changing and dynamic nature of the English teaching profession means that teachers have a need for on-going professional development, not only to keep up with changes and trends but also to address the high attrition rate among language teachers, with many leaving the profession after only a few years (Díaz-Maggioli 2003). In teacher education programmes in general, and in Second Language Teacher Education (SLTE) in particular, a variety of activities have been recommended to support professional development for language teachers (Richards and Farrell 2005). There is however little documented evidence about whether and how teachers in English as a foreign language context take part in PD activities. To fill this gap, this paper examines the array of professional development programmes available to Iranian state-sector and private English teachers and reveals the motivations behind their participation in such activities. The reasons why English teachers chose language teaching as their profession and the challenges they face in attending PD courses are also surveyed. Recommendations are then provided as to how some of these challenges may be tackled. The recommendations are expected to apply to other EFL teachers working in similar contexts in Iran and places where teachers face similar constraints as those described here.

2. Review of literature

2.1. Recent developments in TESOL

TESOL is a field that has witnessed many changes and developments in the last 50 years or so. In addition to changed understandings of the nature of language and language learning, the field has also experienced

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re-examination of the roles of learners and teachers as well as the nature of teaching itself, i.e., how teaching is understood and theorised and the knowledge and skills that teachers need in order to function as effective English language teachers in today's world. Professional development is seen as a priority in preparing teachers for these changes. Such opportunities for development can take a variety of forms depending on the status and roles of teachers in different cultures.

UNESCO (2014, 9) recognises the prominent role teachers play in the future of a society, proposing that 'an education system is only as good as its teachers'. In Islamic countries like Iran, teachers are compared to prophets and an official calendar day in many places is set off as Teachers' Day. Teachers (including English teachers) are generally known as nation builders and agents of change. Teachers are usually regarded as the thinking minds and beating hearts of a society. In practice, however, teachers often feel they do not receive the appreciation they deserve, and this adversely affects their service. Provision of professional development opportunities is one way in which teachers' motivation and skills can be sustained and developed over time.

2.2. Professional development in TESOL

Teacher training approaches emerged in the 1960 and provide the basis for the large number of certified TESOL courses offered by training organisations worldwide, such as Trinity College and International House. In teacher training, the focus is on provision of basic skills to prepare teachers for their first experiences with teaching. The goal is practical mastery of basic knowledge and skills or competencies needed in the classroom. Teacher training follows a top-down, expert-driven process where an outsider delivers the training and models the teaching. Training-oriented courses are appropriate for beginning teachers where they learn how to translate knowledge into practice and how to teach discrete skills and subskills of the language (such as how to plan a lesson or how to teach a dialogue) with an emphasis on procedures, techniques and strategies required to deliver an English lesson, often following a lesson template such as the P-P-P (Presentation-Practice-Production) lesson. The assumption is that training activities help student teachers to make the transition from the course-room to the classroom. Teacher training has been described as 'front-loading' by Freeman (1993) where teachers are provided with the needed knowledge and skills needed for functioning in the classroom before they start their career. However, it is also assumed that training is just the first stage in a rather longitudinal developmental process, i.e. teacher development.

Teacher development serves the long-term goal of understanding the nature of teaching and the teacher's understanding of teaching including the teacher's role, the teaching context and an understanding of learners and learning. It builds on teacher training through a deeper understanding of the professional knowledge base of language teaching and focuses on the teacher as a person as well as on the overall process of teaching rather than segregated teaching practices. Teacher learning (Johnson and Freeman 2001) is considered as a constantly evolving process of growth and change where both teachers' understanding is expanded and their knowledge and skills repertoire increase. Learning in teacher development is expected to take place through participation, cooperation and socialization; indeed the cumulative knowledge is co-constructed and shared through the process of internalization. Richards (2008) suggests that teacher development is 'a form of socialization into the professional thinking and practices of a community of practice' (160). Once regarded merely as a cognitive activity and as translating knowledge and theories into practice, teacher learning is now considered as 'constructing new knowledge and theory through participating in specific social contexts and engaging in particular types of activities and processes' (164). Learning is seen as a contextual phenomenon, emerging through interaction with other social partners including students and teachers. It is this reconceptualisation that makes professional development relevant to the focus of this paper.

2.3. Meaning and role of PD

Professional development (PD) is defined by Diaz-Maggioli (2003) as follows:

... an ongoing learning process in which teachers engage voluntarily to learn how best to adjust their teaching to the learning needs of their students. Professional development is not a one-shot, one-size-fits-all event, but rather an evolving process of professional self-disclosure, reflection and growth that yields the best results when sustained over time in communities of practice and when focused on job-embedded responsibilities. (1)

According to Johnston (2009), professional development is self-directed, collaborative, inquiry-based learning by teachers. Collaboration among teachers assigns new identities to teachers, making their cooperation resemble a melting-pot rather than a salad or ‘egg-box profession’ (to use Freeman’s (1998) metaphor). Richards (2008, 171) suggests that professional development is 'self-directed, inquiry-based, and directly relevant to teacher's professional lives'. In English language teaching, professional development plays a number of crucial roles. First of all, assuming that there is a link between good teaching and student success (Darling-Hammond 1998; Diaz-Maggioli 2003, Sparks 2002), professional development can promote teacher learning which leads to better teaching which in turn leads to better student learning (the ultimate goal of all educational enterprises). Secondly, the field of ELT is subject to constant change, and accordingly, professional development can help teachers to become familiar with new developments in the field as well as updating their knowledge base, and teaching skills and resources, such as the use of technology in language teaching. Thirdly, learning that results from professional development activities can energize, motivate and empower the teacher.

As Murray (2010, 3) argues, 'teacher empowerment leads to improvement in student performance and attitude'. Professional development can be motivated by teachers themselves (independent PD) or regulated through management (institutional PD) and can be done on an informal basis (such as talks with colleagues) or formally (such as attending seminars). Furthermore, it can be an individual activity (such as reading professional materials) or a collaborative one (such as attending a conference/workshop). A number of professional development activities for language teachers have been recommended by scholars (e.g. Gebhard 2009; Murray 2010; Richards 2015). These include:

- Expanding our understanding of language teaching (via going online; attending workshops/seminars/conferences; reading (or writing for) professional magazines/journals; doing participatory practitioner research; joining teacher/professional organizations; joining teacher support groups; virtual networking with the help of telegram, etc.)
- Expanding our teaching skills (through taking courses such as CELTA, DELTA, TKT; teaching classes of different kinds and levels; team teaching; attending a workshop; reviewing and reflecting on one's teaching; keeping journals; writing narratives; reflective teaching; analyzing a critical incident; keeping a teaching portfolio)
- Collaborating with other teachers/establishing a learning community (through peer coaching; mentoring; peer observation; study/discussion groups; shared lesson planning; making critical friends).

However Borg (2015, 6) cautions that 'there are no universal templates for success', and suggests conditions under which professional development works best such as whether PD is relevant to the needs of teachers and their students as well as whether teachers are involved in decisions about content and process of PD activities.

Borg (2015, 5) observes that many current PD practices reflect a 'training-transmission' model of language teacher education: 'one which places teachers in the role of 'knowledge consumers'. In this approach,
teachers are expected to gain ‘received knowledge’ (which is generated externally) in one-off workshops and expected to implement it in their classrooms. Similarly Johnson (2009) argues that professional development is often thought of as ‘something that is done by others for or to teachers’ (25). Borg adds, ‘teachers often dismiss these as irrelevant to their needs, impractical and unfeasible ... [with] minimal impact on what subsequently happens in the classroom ... the harsh reality is that CPD in such cases is too often largely a waste of time’ (ibid). Such an approach, he argues, ‘fails to produce sustained positive changes in teaching and learning’ casting doubt on ‘whether the time and resources invested in it can be justified’ (6).

2.4. SLTE in Iran

Although the field of second language teacher education (SLTE) is a well established field within TESOL and applied linguistics (Burns and Richards 2009), it has not as yet become well established in Iran. Except for one or two courses on practical teaching and teaching methods, no course is offered on SLTE in BA or MA degrees in university ELT programmes and only recently has an optional teacher education course been added to the curriculum of PhD in ELT; and formal attempts have currently started in MSRT (Iranian Ministry of Science, Research and Technology, an organization which oversees higher education programmes) to establish a PhD in Applied Linguistics with a specialization in SLTE. Consequently despite Iranian English teachers having a university degree in English, they may have received little or no practical training in the skills of classroom language teaching. In addition, little support is provided once they commence their teaching careers, although Iran’s only teacher education university (Farhangian University) has recently started offering occasional workshops for English teachers, the focus of which is primarily initial teacher training rather than longer-term teacher (professional) development. The distinction between teacher training and teacher development provides a useful basis for reviewing the nature of teacher education for language teachers in Iran. (We use “teacher education” here as an umbrella term to include both teacher training and teacher development).

2.5. Research questions

In light of criticisms raised by Borg (2015) concerning potential advantages and challenges of professional development activities for language teachers, and considering the lack of relevant empirical evidence in the Iranian context, we sought to examine whether these challenges and affordances also applied to English language teachers in Iran. To do so we surveyed the types of PD activities Iranian English teachers in two very different contexts (i.e. public versus private sector) engaged in and the motivations that prompted them to do so. The study aimed to find answers to the following questions:

1. What types of professional development activities do Iranian state and private ELT teachers take part in?
2. What are the reasons for taking part in PD activities?
3. What problems do English teachers face in their career/professional development?

3. The study

3.1. Design and participants

The study was conducted to understand the types of PD activities Iranian EFL teachers in public and private contexts were engaged, the motivations behind those activities, and the problems they faced in this process. The best design to address the relevant questions was a qualitative design which employed face to face focus-group interviews.

We aimed to recruit teachers from two private language institutes (as we believed depending on the institute they worked, teachers could be offered different PD options) and public sector (teachers working in different public schools). It was important to elicit data from these two different contexts since the types of teachers working in these contexts were very different from each other: While more motivated, more proficient, more energetic and younger teachers usually work in private institutes where the focus is on teaching spoken language, teachers in public schools are generally less motivated, less energetic, older and use more traditional teaching methods like grammar translation which does not require a full command of spoken English. Furthermore, while most students attending private language centres are highly motivated as they come from relatively rich families and opt to enroll in such classes, students in the state sector are generally less motivated as they are have to attend English classes as part of their regular schooling without their will, and this can affect teachers’ motivation to teach and learn by attending PD programmes. Subsequently, we approached two well-known private institutes in Urmia, Iran, in each of which we could identify around 10 teachers willing to participate (9 in one and 11 in another as stated later). We aimed for a similar number of public sector teachers as well, but after contacting more than 20 teachers we could secure the participation of 4 teachers only. (There were numerous reasons for unwillingness to participate, as discussed later). A similar number of public school teachers would have been more desirable for comparison purposes. But given that we were unable to recruit a comparable number of teachers from the public sector (primarily because they were not interested in contributing to research collaborations), we could not compare data belonging to these two sectors. We however report data separately for the two private language centres, public schools, and all teachers (working in language centres and public schools) to contribute to a better understanding of the overall picture.

As such, a total of 24 English teachers took part in the study. Teachers working for the Ministry of Education (public sector) and two well-known language institutes were approached for cooperation. Only 4 (17 %) male teachers from the former category volunteered to take part. Nine teachers (37 %) from the first language centre (2 male, 7 female) and 11 teachers (46%) from the second language institute (3 male, 8 female) attended focus group semi-structured interviews. The age range of the teachers working at the public sector ranged from 29 to 50 (with a mean of 39.5); and for private teachers, it ranged from 25 to 40 (mean = 30) and 24 to 42 (mean = 31) for language centres 1 and 2, respectively.

3.2. Procedure

After arrangements with the authorities of the language centres, teachers were invited to face-to-face focus group interviews at a convenient place and time in their institutes. Public school teachers were interviewed at the researchers’ office at university. The interviews lasted between 75 and 90 min and were all recorded for later analysis. The interviews focused on such questions as why teachers chose to be English teachers, whether they were happy with their position (as warm up questions), what they did to develop professionally, what their suggestions were for more effective PD, what some of the challenges were that they faced in teaching and attending PD courses (in line with the aims of the study) and whether they would choose teaching English as a job again if they were given a second chance (for winding down). The elicited data was analysed following he principles of Discourse Analysis (Bernardes et al., 2019) by looking at patterns of meaning in interview data and coding them thematically into categories like motivation for choosing teaching as profession, type of PD attended, type of PD preferred, motivation for taking up PD, challenging of attending PD workshops/courses, profession wished to adopt, and the like. A re-coding was done by an independent researcher and there was 96 percent agreement. Furthermore, to add credibility to data interpretations, the analyses were shared with the interviewed teachers and they confirmed the truthfulness and accuracy of the interpretations. Below are some of the main findings of the study.
4. Results and discussion

4.1. RQ1

To answer the first research question, we asked the participants about whether they were engaged in the following professional development activities either individually or institutionally. Table 1 presents the type of professional development activities teachers took part as well as the number/percentage of teachers in each group practicing each PD activity:

Based on the above table, more teachers in private institutes took part in PD activities compared to public school teachers. The PD activities teachers chose were not exclusive and they could choose more than one activity; it was not however mentioned whether a certain activity like reading journals was done online or in print. It is most probable that it did not happen online as this could have raised the number of participating teachers (only one public school teacher took part in this PD activity). Like attending conferences, journals and books are not free for teachers and they have to pay to attend external events, hence very limited rate of such activities. In-house workshops or TTCs are usually free of charge, however. It is significant to learn that very few teachers read any professional materials, perhaps because the most well-known professional journal in the country (EFL Roshd [Development] Magazine) targets public rather than private teachers. It is also interesting to discover that membership of a support group is almost non-existent, hence very few teachers (8 %) use these groups as resources to rely on when they need them and a similar low rate attend workshops or conferences to develop professionally. However, the Internet is reported as an important PD resource for both public and private school teachers, with an overall rate of 70 % of all teachers consulting online resources for their professional development. Participants however did not comment on what sorts of internet sources they used. This is followed by watching educational resources as the most frequently used (62 %) professional development activity. For private teachers, ELT books also provide a major source of PD (65%), a tool adopted by 56.5 % of all teachers. One of the language schools seems to have been fostering a research oriented environment and encouraging dialogue among teachers since more than 65 percent of its teachers have engaged with these PD activities, while in the other institute they play a less important role (with only 27 percent of teachers involved), and are totally non-existent among public school teachers, which makes these two final PD activities to be adopted by an average of 37 % of all teachers.

One of the public school teachers commented that 'I work in a school where I am the only English teacher', hence the impossibility of joining discussion groups to develop professionally. However, even if someone is the only English teacher in a school, the Internet can still facilitate PD. Given the easy access to the worldwide web and given the lesson learned during the COVID-19 pandemic, discussion groups need not follow traditional face-to-face scenarios and the use of apps such as Telegram and Whatapp has made chats and communication among people far apart physically much easier than it used to be. In addition to the PD activities listed above, a limited number of institute (private) teachers reported participation in other PD activities, such as focused peer observation, receiving guidance from a supervisor, and action research. Most of private teachers (85%) had also participated in compulsory in-house teacher training courses (TTC) and all MoE teachers reported participating in one or more such in-service workshops. In this study, we use professional development in the broadest sense possible, where teacher-training-related activities such as pre-service and in-service TTC workshops as well as those more volunteer teacher development initiatives are counted as examples of professional development. Indeed while talking about professional development, most teachers talked about their TTC experiences primarily because in-service or even pre-service training experiences were one of the most vivid training experiences they remembered in their professional development path.

4.2. RQ2

Another aim of this research was to find out what the motivation for teachers was behind taking part in PD activities. This question generated a range of answers from having no motivation/reason at all to becoming a better teacher, as we see in the following comments.

An MoE teacher who pursued MA studies in ELT as a means of his professional development (as he claimed it to be) stated that ‘Frankly speaking, my MA didn’t increase my knowledge of ELT; with a BA I used better teaching methods but the MA has widened my worldview’. Apparently for this teacher and perhaps many others who take up postgraduate studies, the primary goal is not professional development, but rather a means for financial advancement. Indeed most of such teachers would like to complete their studies as soon as possible in order to receive a pay increase at their work place (as attested by some of the interviewees), an unsurprising fact in times of financial hardship for many Iranians. The motivation for taking part in professional development is therefore instrumental and institutional for most public teachers rather than reflecting a real zest for teacher development or learning. As for private teachers, while instrumental motivation is still in place, a good number pursue PD for personal development as a more effective teacher.

Another MoE teacher reflected that he had no motivation whatsoever to attend such programmes (i.e., PD activities) since ‘my only duty [at school] is to increase student pass rate and give 15 [out of 20] to somebody with no English competence’. The motivation to attend PD courses for other MoE teachers we interviewed was self-oriented rather than client-oriented, that is, they looked at such programmes as opportunities to increase their own English competence, rather than as opportunities to equip them to teach better in the classroom. One teacher commented, ‘I watch English films to promote my English rather than as a way to teach better’.

A private teacher who had opted for an MA to further her professional development complained that this did not happen: ‘I hoped to teach at university after getting an MA but still I teach at institute; so what is the use of my gaining a higher qualification? I don’t want to do a PhD anymore as I fear that I will remain at the institute after PhD too.’ Indeed, this teacher viewed MA studies as a bridge to swap from the institute context to a higher education one, and as a means for career promotion, rather than PD in its true sense as the candidate felt. This comment also reflects changes in employment requirements for university teaching in Iran. Until recently it was possible for MA holders to teach at university, but there are increasingly many PhD graduates filling positions at universities; and consequently, for MA graduates, university employment (even contractual) is not easy to obtain (except for teaching general English courses on an hourly rate). Those who take up postgraduate studies with a hope to get promoted to a university position become disappointed when they learn that they could do the same job at school or institute with a lower degree and therefore regard the MA as a waste of
time and budget rather than an opportunity or a means of professional development.

One public teacher described his motivation for doing an MA as follows: ‘I did an MA after 22 years since I didn’t like my son to be looked down at school for my low education. The school he attends has kids whose parents are either doctors or engineers.’ Comments such as this suggest that for a good number of teachers taking a professional development course may not be motivated by a genuine interest in personal professional development: in this particular case, PD activities are simply face-saving acts which allow the teacher to please family members or friends. Such activities would appear to have little real value and can be termed self-satisfying events that are neither professional nor support the development of the teacher or his or her institution. Indeed most of the teachers (both private and public) we interviewed did not opt for the PD activities themselves: They were either asked by the school/institute to undertake the activity, or they did so in order to increase their chances for career promotion and earning more money (as far as getting a higher degree was concerned). Consequently it appears that for many of the teachers there was no real motivation to professionally develop by taking so-called professional development courses; nor did most teachers regard such courses as influential in their better delivery of courses.

4.3. RQ3

The participating teachers were also asked about the challenges they faced in attending PD activities like workshops as well as generally in their career. Below we present an account of some major observations.

In commenting on the types of workshops teachers attended as part of their PD, many raised criticisms against the courses/workshops they attended. For example, an MoE teacher argued that workshops should be run by an insider who already has the experience of teaching at public schools. Teachers reported that what happens most often is that uni-

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versity teachers are invited to lead workshops on different aspects of teaching; however, the presenters themselves generally have not had the experience of teaching at schools and are unaware of the real classroom context and the challenges teachers face in their teaching. Borg (2015) recommends that workshops for teachers should be held in the classroom and should involve the participation of the teachers themselves, rather than offered in the course room or elsewhere by someone who is not involved in classroom school-based teaching. Otherwise, such activities accrue little benefit to anybody except for workshop leader and the staff who organize the event.

Another teacher from the same context recommended that workshop leaders should provide a real and practical model of how to teach than merely giving advice on how to teach. This would involve providing examples of teaching in a real classroom context rather than promoting theories. What classroom teachers most often need, he commented, is a toolbox of practical activities and demonstrations which they can apply in their actual teaching contexts. Given the context-specific nature of every classroom, this presents a real challenge to teacher trainers. Teachers (mainly public ones) reported that they would like to see the trainer in action: actually teaching a lesson that the teachers could teach. Interestingly, this suggests that for many practicing teachers a ‘teacher training’ rather than a ‘teacher development’ approach is preferred. Some of the interviewees felt that the management should be supportive of such programmes and should offer them financial resources to attend conferences and workshops, while others felt that conferences were not useful since they were generally research-oriented: they said they needed teaching-oriented workshops that took place in real classrooms with real students (not mock students). For such teachers an ideal conference would be one where ample opportunities are provided for practical classroom-focused workshop activities.

In order to find out more about what challenges participants experienced as English teachers, we also asked them about the motivation behind their choice of the career as well as what job they would choose if they were given a second chance. Regrettably the reasons teachers provided indicated that few of them had knowingly chosen to be an English teacher out of real interest in and love for teaching. For example, one teacher commented that she loved teaching English literature but not English language (that she was required to teach at the institute). For many teachers, the logic was that there was no other job available and being recruited as a part-time teacher in an institute was the only position open for them since they had studied English at university. Some of the teachers reported that the choice to major in English at university was made by their parents and that the only path they could continue after graduation was to become an English teacher. A middle-aged MoE teacher commented that at the time he took university entrance examination (some 30 years ago), he could also choose to study medicine but opted to study English since at that time teachers enjoyed a very high social status. He added that now he is very un-happy with his career since teachers are neither respected to the extent they used to be nor do they receive a salary that suffices for their basic life.

This lack of interest in being an English teacher is evident in the responses teachers provided for the question of what they would do if they had a second chance to choose their job. Except for one teacher who said he would remain a teacher ‘if there is enough pay’, all the others wished to change their career and take such positions as artist, engineer, doctor, nurse, poet, bank clerk, writer, researcher, translator, musician, bookshop owner, dentist, fashion designer, architect, film director and cake seller. One teacher felt that he would rather have an ‘open job’, a term used in Iran for self-employed jobs not having specific identities (such as a seasonal labourer, a supermarket owner, etc.).

These comments reflect the fact that Iranian teachers are underpaid compared to teachers in many other countries. While MoE teachers are usually full-time and permanent teachers receiving a monthly salary (of around 200 USD per month), teachers working in the private sector are expected to work more but are paid less. They have no tenure and most of them work contractually and on a part-time basis. The pressure to earn enough to make a living forces many teachers to work in different places and the work overload affects the quality of service they deliver. By contrast, in the public sector, there are fewer demands on teachers, teachers are not supervised and there are very few quality control measures; so public school teachers would normally be happy with the salary they receive in turn for the service they provide. Teachers working in the private sector on the other hand are required to teach well and are strictly supervised. Given the limited number of positions available at both schools and private institutes, recruitment follows certain procedures and is very competitive (Sadeghi and Ghaderi 2018). All this puts a heavy burden on the shoulders of English graduates to compete for a contractual hourly employment, and when faced with inadequate pay rates and unsatisfactory working conditions, most such teachers (especially at private centres) think of leaving as soon as they start their profession, attesting to Farrell (2016) observation that TESOL has become a profession that eats its young.

To these problems may be added challenges that teachers reported they face in their work context: lack of job security; low social status; teaching regarded as an unimportant job; not respected by students, their families, authorities and other colleagues; no reward (but only punishment) system; outdated materials (called ‘museum books’ by one of the MoE teachers); and not being recognised as an authority in the classroom. One teacher put this last concern in an eloquent expression saying that the only person that does not count is the teacher: ‘The teacher is a weapon that cannot shoot’. The lack of motivation by Iranian teachers to perform as effectively as desired may also be due to some teachers’ affiliation with ‘an anti-imperialistic ideology’, which, according to Ghaffar Samar and Davari (2011, p. 64), is the dominant ideology in Iranian society, an ideology which may be common nowadays given increasingly globalised outreach of English and the more recent evidence on the ‘idea of English in Iran’ (Sadeghi and Richards, 2016).
5. Conclusion and recommendations

The survey above reports the undesirable status of professional development found among the teachers surveyed for this study. The study found that English teachers in the context we studied do not generally take part in substantial PD activities, and when they do, the motivations for doing so are not closely linked to an interest in personal professional development. The low rate of engagement in PD activities (with a decreasing trend from private institute to state school teachers) for some of the participants seems to reflect their dissatisfaction with their choice of language teaching as a career. Responses to the issues identified in this paper are neither simple nor immediate since they reveal factors that have emerged gradually as the language teaching enterprise has assumed its role in public and private education in Iran. The findings of this study may not be generalisable to broader international contexts where English teachers receive better salaries, are more motivated, have access to more opportunities for free PD and are supported by schools and authorities, but we think similar issues are present in contexts similar to ours. Teachers in any context are unlikely to engage in PD activities if such activities offer few practical benefits, if they are not well managed, if teachers are not motivated to further their professional development and if little institutional support is provided to encourage and support such initiatives. What can be done therefore to provide better opportunities for language teachers to engage in PD activities in Iran and elsewhere? In our view both shorter term and longer term initiatives are needed. These include:

- Determining the needs teachers identify for professional development
- Designing PD activities that are designed and implemented by practicing teachers
- Ensuring that workshops are followed up and evaluated
- Providing institutional support and rewards for PD activities, among others.

Some other initiatives that educational authorities can adopt to improve the educational system and satisfy teachers so that they survive the battle and contribute to quality education include recruiting interested and competent teachers in the first place, increasing teacher motivation by increasing payment and respecting their beliefs and values, raising awareness of teachers as to their roles in the future of their society, developing positive attitudes and beliefs in teachers about their identities, and the need for teachers to remain updated to prevent fossilization. Teachers need a change in attitude to understand the value of PD activities as well; otherwise there will be no point in running numerous in-service training courses or TTC workshops. Also, such programmes need to be bottom-up both in their selection, and in their planning and implementation since teachers know their context, needs and limits more than anybody else.

However, for these plans to work, managerial support is essential, and the advice and cooperation of more knowledgeable external professionals as leaders will certainly lead to these PD activities to yield fruit. Authorities should aim for a variety of PD opportunities and the participating teachers in such activities should be rewarded. As soon as a PD programme is over, its effectiveness needs to be judged by teachers and authorities. The criteria for appraisal should include the value of such activities in bringing about positive changes in teaching and their contribution to facilitated learning by students among others such as availability of the resources and so on. The authorities should first of all take enough care to make the right decisions as to who can be a teacher; unfortunately many public (English) teachers in Iran (and possibly in many other countries) are recruited according to non-academic criteria and their English (teaching) merit is what counts the least. In a Turkish public university context, for instance, it is an acceptable norm to place a university lecturer at a department where there is a vacancy, regardless of the match between the teacher's expertise area and the required expertise in the department. In the private sector, the situation is much better; however, teachers are primarily recruited based on their English proficiency and knowledge of teaching methods rather than their teaching potential. While language proficiency is an important predictor of the success of teaching, effective teachers need other competencies that should be considered in a teacher recruitment process (Sadeghi et al., 2019); furthermore, a high language proficiency does not automatically translate into good teaching (Richards 2015).

As soon as a right decision is made on who should be recruited as a teacher (and who should not), the management needs to plan regular PD activities for the teaching staff as these PD activities can themselves be a source of further motivation for interested teachers. We have however to recognise that as learners learn in different ways and as teachers teach in different ways, there is no single path teachers should follow for their PD. Murray (2010) confirms this concept, claiming that there is no single recipe for PD that works for everyone.

Indeed effective PD calls for adequate support structures and opportunities for teachers to select, plan, carry out and evaluate the PD activities in which they are involved. PD works best collaboratively; and when teachers have the chance to participate in the creation and implementation of PD programs, they develop ownership over the learning process and this learning is more likely to contribute to better student learning. We concur with Johnson (2009) that for PD programs to succeed, they must be designed and implemented with the active cooperation of teachers and must focus on ‘learning in, from, and for L2 teaching practice’ (26). For PD programmes to yield fruit, we suggest that such activities focus on teacher learning rather than teacher training. This learning above all takes place in the classroom so the classrooms are not places where only students learn; they are also places where teachers can learn. Effective PD programmes are beyond doubt collaborative ventures and those that generate new understandings from within, through school-based collaboration between teachers, management and outsider professionals. Fundamental to all these, we propose, are learning oriented environments where teachers are highly motivated to teach (and learn), students are motivated to learn, and authorities are committed to facilitate the teaching-learning process. For this recommendation to work, learners and teachers need protection against economic, social, political, affective and health problems that can intervene in the process of optimal education.

Declarations

Author contribution statement

Karim Sadeghi: Conceived and designed the experiments; Performed the experiments; Analyzed and interpreted the data; Contributed reagents, materials, analysis tools or data; Wrote the paper.

Jack C. Richards: Conceived and designed the experiments; Analyzed and interpreted the data; Wrote the paper.

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Data included in article/supplementary material/referenced in article.

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The authors declare no conflict of interest.
Additional information

No additional information is available for this paper.

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