Implementing English language teaching reforms through professional learning

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ABSTRACT
In response to recent reforms to English language education in secondary schools in Iran, this study investigated how a small collaborative professional learning community prompted shifts in teachers’ practices. The study relied on Engeström’s professional learning intervention to examine the practices of three junior high school teachers. Through the analysis of teacher observations and interviews, the findings revealed that the teachers’ collaboration and engagement, and the time devoted to review and reflection on their teaching, encouraged minor changes in the teachers’ practices that aligned with the reform agenda. The study has implications for professional learning in Iran and similar contexts. It informs a need for a movement from top-down professional learning programs to more collaborative approaches to teacher education when the aim is to address reform-driven educational changes.

KEYWORDS
Professional learning; reforms; Iran; secondary education; EFL

1. Introduction: English language teaching and the nature of professional learning programs in Iran

Recent reforms in Iran’s education system required secondary school teachers to shift from the traditional approaches to language teaching to the use of communicative pedagogies to improve students’ proficiency in English (Kheirabadi & Alavi Moghaddam, 2014). Approaches to teaching that underpin these pedagogies emphasise the meaningful use of language so that learners communicate through oral or written language with a focus on meaning rather than an initial focus on language features such as grammar, or subskills such as alphabet knowledge. While teachers may incorporate a peripheral attention to specific language features, the focus is on the provision of active learning opportunities (Ellis & Shintani, 2014). Teachers are encouraged to involve learners in the learning process, allowing them to experience how language is used in communication (Willis & Willis, 2009).

In order to align their practices with the new approach to teaching English, the Iranian English language teachers were required to participate in the government-directed teacher training programs, informed by the national policies and educational goals. Before the reform, teacher-training workshops promoted traditional literacy teaching practices, with a focus on language features (Kiany, Mahdavy, & GhafarSamar, 2011). Significant attention was given to enhancing students’ reading
skills through the manipulation of the relevant vocabulary and grammatical structures (Kiany et al., 2011). After the reform and the subsequent changes to the English language textbooks, teachers were expected to facilitate communicative use of language, as highlighted in the Teacher’s Guidebook for each grade level (e.g. Khadir Sharbian et al., 2013). Spoken language was considered an important component of English language instruction alongside text-based language-learning skills (Kheirabadi & Alavi Moghaddam, 2014). The teacher-training workshops held by the education system throughout the country were designed to target these reform-driven objectives, with the professional learning program’s design reflective of traditional, top-down teacher training approaches.

Studies of professional development in Iran (Nezakat-Alhossanini & Ketab, 2013) indicate that the programs implemented have not always been effective. The top-down training programs, often conducted by external providers, did not reflect nor resonate with the realities of teachers’ classroom experiences (Nezakat-Alhossanini & Ketab, 2013). Despite participating in the mandated professional learning workshops and developing an awareness of the aims of the new English language program, teachers retained deeply embedded traditional ways of English language teaching (see Ganji, Ketabi, & Shahnazari, 2018). This suggests that the process of teacher training should be re-examined to ensure positive gains that enhance students’ learning outcomes.

Although there is evidence of collaborative teacher development programs in Iran (e.g. Motallebzadeh, Hosseininia, & Domskey, 2017), these opportunities are neither common nor sufficiently practised within site-based learning communities (Saberi & Amiri, 2016). As such, this investigation focused on teachers’ engagement in a collaborative teacher learning program within a school setting designed to effect change in both teaching and learning. The aim was to explore how this learning community could provide support that might lead to changes in teachers’ practices in a context where traditional pedagogies have become habituated. In what follows, teacher training in education with a focus on teacher development in the area of TESOL is problematised and details of the study are outlined. Further, the teachers’ practices after participating in both the government-directed professional learning program and a small collaborative learning experience within their school setting are explored and discussed.

2. Theoretical background: problematising teacher training

Training for English language teachers in Iran most often consists of a series of lectures presented by teacher educators, followed by time for questions from participants. The value of lectures is acknowledged, particularly when they are well-designed, innovative, problem-centred, engaging, and encourage critical thinking skills (French & Kennedy, 2017). However, more transmissive lecture-style approaches, which view teachers as passive learners, have only minimal impact on changing practices (Borko, Jacobs, & Koellner, 2010). Wyatt and Ončevska Ager (2017) critiqued these programs as course-focused, input-based, externally-defined, deficit-oriented, one-way and knowledge transmitter, having short-term objectives and lacking impact on practice. Further, these traditional, top-down approaches seem to be narrow and career-oriented (Mann, 2005). While these training programs may promote forms of collegiality and
friendship and meet teachers’ social and emotional needs, they often result in teachers continuing to work independently (Borko et al., 2010).

Clearly, teacher learning can have a positive impact on changing teacher practice when teachers are positioned as active learners and engaged in self-directed learning with the aim of enhancing their understanding of aspects of their practices and addressing concerns recognised by the teachers themselves within their own professional setting (Borg, 2013; Darling-Hammond, Hyler, & Gardner, 2017; Johnson, 2009). Mann (2005) specifically uses the term teacher development for such learning programs, regarding the term as more inclusive, personal and reflective of teachers’ moral and ethical commitment. This type of bottom-up teacher development program invites English language teachers to actively participate in collaborative, reflective, dialogic and cooperative professional practices to reconstruct and change their practices in ways that are responsive to the particular teaching and learning needs of their immediate environment (Farrell, 1999; Mann, 2005; Wyatt & Ončevska Ager, 2017). Such strong forms of collegiality can empower the English language teachers, increase their motivation and lead to improvement in the quality of teaching as teachers share responsibility and a commitment to cooperative efforts to change their practices (Hanks, 2015).

Teacher development can, thus, occur where teachers meet as a team and form a learning community while being engaged in collective participation and negotiation (Borko et al., 2010; Buğra & Wyatt, 2020; Cole, 2012). Through team work, teachers can benefit from each other’s support, knowledge and experiences within their school (Borko et al., 2010; Goodyear, 2017), with smaller-sized learning teams seen to increase teachers’ focus, collaboration and shared leadership, visions and practices, helping them achieve a satisfactory learning outcome (see Maloney & Konza, 2011). Apart from setting the ground for cooperative team work, collaboration also allows teachers to adapt models of practice and adjust them to particular class contexts (Johnson, 2009). In addition, a more experienced teacher or a facilitator can provide models of practice to support teachers during the process of change (Aspfors, Porn, Forsman, Salo, & Karlberg-Granlund, 2015). This type of team work, facilitation and reflection on one’s own practice can improve teachers’ capacity for improvement and assist them in developing new ways of modifying their teaching (Beighton, 2016; Mann, 2005).

It is not yet known to what extent teachers are open to new initiatives that may engage them as active agents and encourage them to take responsibility for their own growth (Wyatt & Ončevska Ager, 2017). In addition, collaborative learning may be met with teachers’ resistance. In Maloney and Konza’s (2011) small-scale study of early childhood education in Australia, most of the participant teachers working as a team became reluctant to participate, took a passive role or refrained from further participation. Such challenges, resistance and sometimes confusion about the nature of group work have also been reported in workplaces where English language teachers worked as small teams within educational settings (e.g. Buğra & Wyatt, 2020; Farrell, 1999; Wyatt & Dikilitas, 2016). In these contexts, teachers were not deeply involved in collaboration as they either did not find the group work sufficiently dynamic to support change, or they faced time pressures or were affected by other similar contextual challenges. Yet, developing trust and interactive collaboration during which English language teachers can regularly share, discuss and reflect on their personal experiences can support these teachers’ professional activity and help them overcome tensions they may face (Farrell,
Further, mentors or facilitators can intervene to scaffold and support these teachers in the process of reflection as they engage with exploratory and reflective practices (Buğra & Wyatt, 2020; Wyatt & Ončevska Ager, 2017).

Reflective and collaborative practices in the area of TESOL are not often enacted systematically or reported clearly, and there is a need for investigations which share instances of data-led reflection on action where teachers come to a new understanding through the process of exploring their practices and sharing understanding through dialogue (Mann & Walsh, 2013). This is particularly true in educational contexts like Iran where English language teachers are expected to revise their traditional models of teaching, and where top-down teacher training development do not provide teachers with adequate agency and incentive to initiate change. This study viewed the establishment of a small learning community within a school as a possible platform to explore ways of improving practices through the processes of implementation and reflection. Using observation and recorded and transcribed interviews, this small-scale study attempted to provide clear examples of instances where the participating teachers examined their context-sensitive practices and reflected on their teaching in their immediate work setting to implement changes to strengthen students’ learning outcomes.

3. The design of the study

This qualitative study adopted Engeström’s (2000) professional learning intervention model, with roots in Vygotsky’s sociocultural theory, to design the investigation. The intervention, designed and facilitated by the primary researcher, created space for collaborative professional learning where team members collectively shared, reflected upon and resolved the issues they faced. As the problems were identified, opportunities were provided for ideas to be shared and for new practices to be innovated and adapted over time (Engeström, 2000, 2001; Engeström & Sannino, 2010).

3.1. The site and participants

The participants included three experienced junior high school English language teachers with pseudonyms: Bita, Elnaz and Simin. In Iran, students begin to learn English as a compulsory subject at junior high school for an average of three hours a week during the academic year. Junior high school starts after students finish six years of primary education at the age of 12. The participating teachers in this study taught English using the new textbooks during a summer school course in a junior high school in a large city in Iran. During the intensive six-week course, each teacher taught English for four and a half hours every week. The school ran these classes with the purpose of preparing students for the upcoming academic year. Bita and Elnaz taught Grade 2 and Simin taught Grade 1 in the summer school program. At the time of the intervention, the teachers had been using the new texts for two years.

3.2. Data collection and analysis

In this investigation, Engeström’s (2000) professional learning intervention guided the collection and analysis of data. The three Iranian English language teacher participants
engaged in joint efforts to improve their current practices during a number of intervention sessions. These teachers went through a staged cycle of enactment and reflection during which they questioned their practice, identified problems, negotiated and implemented new solutions, and either consolidated new forms of practice or reverted to their old practices (Engeström, 2000). Tensions that occurred in each class encouraged the teachers to become involved in collective problem-solving processes (Beighton, 2016; Engeström, 2000, 2001). The researcher was a facilitator who supported the teachers throughout the intervention by providing them with professional learning and problem-solving opportunities.

Data were collected from the three teachers during classroom and workshop observations as well as individual and focus-group interviews. In total, there were six 90-minute observations of each teachers’ class, four 30-minute individual interviews with every teacher, two 30-minute workshop observations, and three 30-minute focus-group interviews. The workshops and focus-group interviews were group meetings or the intervention sessions where the researcher and the three teachers were present.

The observations of each class and the follow-up individual interviews provided insights into the teachers’ actual practice and their views on the teaching implemented. The workshop observations and focus-group meetings were central to the intervention. During the workshops, new ideas were suggested by the facilitator or the teachers themselves. In contrast, the focus-group meetings were opportunities for the teachers to reflect on what they had implemented in class, discuss solutions to the problems as they emerged, and revise or adapt the newly employed ideas.

The data collected facilitated the investigation of teachers’ professional practices and allowed for the identification of the changes and tensions that arose within their particular work context (see Engeström & Sannino, 2010). As participants accept, navigate, develop or revise the negotiated suggestions, the new practices may conflict with old practices, which may subsequently call for new ways of working, further revision of current practices, or result in a return to old practices (Engeström & Sannino, 2010). In this study, the teachers’ professional practices were traced over the intervention period and as the teachers engaged in iterative processes of implementation and reflection (Beighton, 2016; Engeström, 2000).

The collected data were analysed thematically using Braun and Clark’s (2006) thematic analysis. The translated transcripts from the interviews and the field notes from the observations were carefully read several times to identify, analyse and report constituent components based on Engeström’s (2001) activity theory triangle, as patterns within the data, to conceptualise teachers’ practices. These included: subject teachers who were engaged in teaching and negotiations; tools or mediators such as suggestions negotiated between the researcher and the teachers or among the teachers themselves; rules or teachers’ practical principles and beliefs that impacted on their classroom instructional approaches; division of tasks between each teacher and her students in class; and object or teaching goals that were the problem space towards which the teachers directed their practices. The categorisation was a recursive process moving from the data to the categories and vice versa to ascertain that relevant data were grouped under the same categories. This also helped categories to be modified through constant comparative analysis across data (Merriam, 2009).
3.3. The facilitator

As an English language educator in Iran, the facilitator had a background in teaching English in Iranian secondary schools. She had knowledge of communicative pedagogies, was familiar with the English language teaching context and the resources provided, and was aware of the programs mandated by the Iranian education system. As a facilitator in the research, she intended to invite and motivate the teachers to explore and develop their professional practices, focusing on the practices required by the reforms (Aspfors et al., 2015). During the workshops, she supported and guided the teachers towards the implementation of the innovations outlined in the new textbooks. During focus-group meetings, her role was confined to raising questions in an effort to increase opportunities for teachers’ collective negotiation, review and reflection.

The research design was guided by the researcher’s sociocultural stance, and her insider role and viewpoints (Hollliday, 2007). However, adopting a reflective stance helped the researcher balance her emic and etic perspectives and carefully self-monitor the impact of biases, beliefs, and personal experiences on the research (Berger, 2015). To address reactivity (i.e. whether the participants were behaving differently due the data collection processes; Xerri, 2018) and validity, the interview data supplemented the observations; and during the interviews, the researcher allowed the interviewees to provide detailed comments (Yin, 2014). In addition, the researcher cross-referenced data from the class observations with the data from the interviews to make sure she had an accurate representation of what she had observed. The observations and interview data were also cross-checked with later data in order to ensure the consistency of the reported behaviour over time and to show how data were related and influenced by the earlier events.

4. Results

4.1. Teachers’ practices after participating in the government’s professional learning program

At the start of this study, despite having participated in the professional development workshops provided by the government, the teachers continued to implement traditionally-oriented teaching practices. These results reflect findings from studies that report there were no changes in teaching English at Iranian schools after the reform (Ganji et al., 2018). In order to understand why these teachers’ practices remained unchanged, in the following two sections, the teachers’ views on the government-directed teacher training and the teachers’ approaches to teaching are discussed.

4.1.1. Teachers’ attitudes towards the government-directed training program

In an interview at the start of the study, the teachers reported that they participated in the teacher-training workshops held by the government with the intention to learn how to implement the reforms to English teaching. They stated that in the training workshop the trainers introduced communicative pedagogies. However, they explained that the learning programs were not consistent with the particular nature of their class contexts and students’ needs. They stated they were unable to improve their students’ learning through these pedagogies, based on the generalised instructions they received
in the workshops, which failed to take account of their students’ low English language proficiency levels. For example, Simin said:

I remember the workshop trainer asked us not to teach the English alphabet discretely. This may be viable in other classes, but I did not find this suggestion practical. I continued with the initial alphabet teaching. This is what I thought was useful given the nature of my own classrooms’ context.

Also, Elnaz explained:

In the teacher training classes, they asked us not to teach the grammar, but this is not possible. Students are at a low English proficiency level and cannot learn the language if they do not initially learn its grammar.

This data shows that that the teachers did not respond well to the top-down directive teacher training programs as they did not find the programs inclusive or responsive to the learning needs and the particular nature of their classes (Farrell, 1999; Mann, 2005; Wyatt & Ončevska Ager, 2017). As such, they did not implement the reforms or align their practices with the teaching approaches presented in the training workshops.

4.1.1.1. Teachers’ approaches to teaching

The initial class observations revealed that the three teachers maintained traditional approaches to teaching reading, writing and grammar. For example, in Grade 1, the teacher taught the English alphabet by writing letters on the whiteboard, and involved her students in reading, repetition and writing practice to help them recognise the alphabet in some simple words. At this stage of the study, speaking practices were absent from this teacher’s classes. In Grade 2, after reading and translating the opening conversation in a lesson from the textbook, both teachers taught the relevant grammar structures, such as subject-verb agreement, which were then practised during teacher directed questions. These oral drill practices appeared to be a means for ensuring that grammar structures were mastered by the students. The teachers reminded the students of the structures taught and corrected the students whenever they produced grammatically incorrect phrases or sentences during these single question and answer exchanges.

To learn more about the rationales informing the teachers’ practices, the teachers were interviewed. The teachers explained that they believed spoken language could develop through the aid of initial literacy practices. They stated that literacy had to precede oracy and that students’ oral proficiency would be enhanced through question and answer practices that were facilitated by initial reading, writing and alphabet knowledge. Therefore, instead of developing meaningful communication, the teachers provided their students with traditional reading and writing practices in order to prepare them for controlled speaking practices. The teachers’ comments in the post-observation interviews also revealed that their approach to English language teaching was premised on their prior teaching practices and experiences (see Borg, 2003) and was the result of a strong commitment to traditional pedagogies.

This data showed that the teachers’ practices reflected their beliefs (Borg, 2006). Although it may be difficult to change teachers’ beliefs (Borg, 2006), teacher professional development programs that provide teachers with opportunities to reflect on
practice may encourage teachers to rethink their beliefs and practices (Borg, 2006; Scull & Johnson, 2000). If teachers are supported and engaged in collective and dialogical process of negotiation and reflection, they can be encouraged to revisit and revise their practices (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017; Hanks, 2015; Mann, 2005). In the section that follows, the ways in which the teachers collectively attempted to reform their teaching practices and enhance their students’ learning are examined.

### 4.2. Teachers’ engagement in collaborative professional learning

The intervention implemented in this study provided the teachers with opportunities to reflect upon their teaching practices and trial or develop new pedagogies. Although the teachers enacted and reflected upon a number of negotiated suggestions over the intervention, this paper reports the teachers’ engagement with the idea of using role play as a way to introduce communicative approaches in their teaching to focus on students’ speaking skills. In this section, role play as a new teaching tool is explored by the teachers.

#### 4.2.1. Encouraging shared teaching goals

At the start of the intervention, as detailed in the new textbooks, it was suggested that the teachers implement role plays in class, with the purpose of developing students’ oral proficiency. Role play as a communicative activity engages students in meaningful communication so they freely produce the language while addressing an existing communicative gap – where learners convey information, give reasons or articulate their opinions – in order to achieve a communicative, nonlinguistic outcome (see Ellis & Shintani, 2014). However, the outcome may also represent a display of language (Shakhsi Dastghahian, Turner, & Scull, 2020), where an initial focus on linguistic features activates learners’ existing knowledge of the intended language forms to help them produce the language accurately (Ellis, 2018). This latter case is similar to the Presentation, Production and Practice (P-P-P) format in the new Iranian English textbooks (Shakhsi Dastghahian, Turner, & Scull, 2019).

In a P-P-P model of language teaching, the targeted language features such as the relevant vocabulary and grammar structures are presented in the presentation stage, and controlled practices such as structured question and answer practices are used in the practice stage to ensure language accuracy is maintained (Criado, 2013). In the production stage, role play or similar activities can be employed to allow students to produce the learned target language features more freely (Ellis & Shintani, 2014).

The Teacher Guidebooks included illustrations of practice, providing examples of how to engage students in the activity. For example, the Guidebook for Grade 2 suggested that teachers instruct their students to role play the scenario where a “new family who have moved to a new apartment meet new neighbours” (Khadir Sharbian et al., 2013, p. 34). However, role plays are the final activities in each lesson, and the guidebooks dictate that teachers prepare students for such activities. Although explicit grammar teaching is discouraged, the initial part of every lesson includes the presentation of language functions, followed by controlled and structured practices such as
drills. This means that teachers are directed to facilitate role plays through a P-P-P model.

In the first workshop, the facilitator suggested that the teachers follow the description of role plays as detailed by the textbooks and guidebooks. This related to her interest in discovering whether the teachers would follow the prescribed P-P-P order of the textbooks, or whether they might start with the stage to allow space for meaning negotiation before directing students’ attention to the intended language features in each lesson. In the latter case, the teachers could allow for less-controlled practices (see Ellis & Shintani, 2014). She also suggested group work as this would provide oral language practice and collaboration opportunities for students, encourage reluctant students to participate, and help them become autonomous learners (Littlewood, 1981). The facilitator suggested that the teachers divide the class into small groups of three or four and provide them with instructions to work cooperatively to complete the activities. At the same time, she was aware of challenges of implementing more communicative pedagogies in contexts where students had limited exposure to English both inside and outside schools.

Working towards new objectives is not without tensions. The teachers’ experimentation with role play is analysed in the two sections. The results explore how the teachers collaboratively resolved the tensions they faced by tailoring role play to the needs of their students and teaching contexts.

4.2.2. Exploring role play and facing tensions

The teachers adapted the suggested role play in groups, adopting the group work element but continuing with their previous drill practices. The teachers’ prior experiences appeared to be a major reason behind their persistence with the use of structured question-and-answer practices, which were carried out during teacher-student pair work. During the intervention, the three teachers gradually provided opportunities for their students to practise and perform their parts in small groups. Nevertheless, there were tensions evident between this new form of practice and their previous use of teacher-guided or teacher-student interactions.

In the observed classes, the teachers divided their students into small groups where they practised question-and-answer sequences before performing these in front of the class. The new practices were carried out in ways complementary to the initial routine reading and writing practices. For example, after opening with reading and writing practice, Bita, one of the Grade 2 teachers, wrote the weekdays and a list of daily activities such as playing or reading on the whiteboard for her students to practise the following single question-and-answer model within groups:

(A) What do you like to do on ...?
(B) I like ...

In Grade 1, the teacher wrote a single question-and-answer model about students’ first and second names on the whiteboard and asked her students to repeat the exchange several times before practising within groups. Simin allowed her students to use the Persian alphabet to write the English model in their notebooks as she read it for them.
In this way, she was carefully scaffolding the learning, given that her students were learning both a new language and script.

Despite these positive shifts towards communicative language teaching, the teachers expressed dissatisfaction in the second workshop. For example, the teachers stressed the need for controlled oral language practice through teacher-student interaction, relating this to their students’ low English language competency. They explained their students were unable to work independently and there was, therefore, a need for teacher initiation and teacher-student interaction. In particular, this was evident in Simin’s class. Simin moved from one group to another to practise the new language structures with each group member. Tensions between group drill, which was a new form of practice, and the teachers’ emphasis on their old teacher-controlled classroom practices appeared to discourage Simin from continuing with the new speaking practices. In the next class, she returned to her previous teaching practices, which included alphabet learning exercises and the associated reading and writing practices, with no time spent on speaking.

4.2.3. Re-Engaging with the shared teaching goals and responding to tensions

Despite facing tensions, the teachers’ negotiation, collaborative thinking and sharing of ideas during the group meetings appeared to help resolve this issue to some extent. In spite of their commitment to drilled structures, the teachers continued their attempts to maintain group work in order to allow for more speaking practice. They expanded these activities to chain drills or controlled dialogues (see Littlewood, 1981), with an aim to develop students’ oral proficiency.

Over time, collegial support encouraged the teachers to persist with the idea of group work. Even Simin, who initially concentrated on teacher-student pair work, found opportunities for student-student interaction both during the practice and performance time. It was Bita’s suggestion to use more group work that appeared to encourage her colleagues to remain engaged with this idea. Although Bita had previously argued against group work due to her students’ low English proficiency, she later stated that student-student interaction increased spoken language practice opportunities and helped develop students’ speaking skills. She related this to her previous experience of repeated reading-related activities in which she had seen an improvement of her students’ reading outcomes. Bita’s reflections and encouragement of her colleagues to do the same represented a small degree of self-determination and empowerment supported by group negotiation. During this dialogical negotiation, the three teachers agreed to continue using group drills.

During the next group gathering, which was the first focus-group interview, Elnaz suggested a new group practice in order to engage the students in more speaking activities. What she described resembled cued dialogues where learners could interact based on a series of cues (see Littlewood, 1981). She said that during her previous lessons, she not only continued with the group work but she also expanded the question and answers to include dialogues. She explained:

I instructed my students in Persian so they would know what to say in each turn of the dialogues while using English to ask questions and answer as a group activity. I also provided a list of words they required for each dialogue in English on the whiteboard.
Elnaz mentioned that she found the practice useful because it provided her students with more opportunities to practise within groups, and this improved their proficiency in speaking.

In the next round of observations, the teachers not only used more group work, but they were also found to expand these activities based on their new interpretations and negotiated ideas around speaking development. Collegial support encouraged them to become active learners who trialled new forms of practice (Darling Hammond, et al. 2017; Wyatt & Ončevska Ager, 2017). Simin developed single question-and-answer practices into chain drills where a longer sequence of similar questions and answers were practised. Bita and Elnaz engaged their students in speaking practices that went beyond the single question-and-answer formats, lengthening an exchange into something that more closely resembled a conversation. The spoken language in the three teachers’ classroom was still controlled in that their students were practising forms they were given and substituting key words, but they were using a larger number of sentences. The collaborative nature of this small learning community appeared to have invited the teachers to collectively reconstruct their practices, resolve the issues they faced and look for new ways of teaching (Buğra & Wyatt, 2020; Farrell, 1999).

The teachers managed to accommodate their emphasis on controlled classroom interaction and develop new teaching strategies to keep their students engaged in group interaction during both practice time and performances. In the second focus-group interview, they shared their understanding and reflection on their practices (Mann & Walsh, 2013). They said that as they implemented more group work, their students’ speaking ability began to develop and this allowed for less teacher-controlled classroom interaction. Regarding the interaction during performances, Bita mentioned that she reduced her eye contact with her students and this gradually improved the interaction among her students. Elnaz said her strategy of asking her students to call on each other by name during the performances promoted interaction among the members of each group. Although Simin allowed for student-student interaction during the group work, it was not until the last few lessons that she developed student-student interaction during group performances. She explained:

I began to replace the team leaders with other group members including the weaker students, encouraging my students to take more responsibility for their own learning and this gradually fostered student-student interaction during the performances.

This quote reflects the growth in Simin’s agency in that she initiated a new way of resolving the issues she had in her own class, and this appeared to be the result of encouragement she received through the collegial sharing of ideas (Beighton, 2016; Hanks, 2015). In addition, through enabling her students to take responsibility and invest in the group work tasks, they were supported to develop their own linguistic and personal identities as English language learners (Economou, 2015).

Towards the end of the intervention, the teachers’ practices remained largely controlled and noncommunicative. However, the dialogical relationship the teachers developed during group negotiations, supported by the facilitator who set the groundwork for collegial consultation, improved the teachers’ learning, knowledge and practice (see Borg, 2006). In the final focus-group interview, the teachers reflected on what they had implemented in class, analysed the usefulness of the shared suggestions and related
their success in developing their students’ speaking skills to the collaborative learning they had experienced. They commented that they found team work and sharing ideas to be very useful because the collaboration not only helped them improve their students’ learning, but it also encouraged them to continuously rethink what they did in class.

5. Discussion

This study explored how small shifts occurred in three Iranian secondary school English language teachers’ practices through participation in a collaborative professional learning within their school setting. The results from this investigation revealed that despite experiencing tensions, the teachers’ cooperation and engagement in dialogue and the time they dedicated to the implementation and review of their teaching resulted in changes to their practice.

This study adopted a collaborative model of teacher development in response to calls for teacher-training programs that assisted teachers meet immediate language-learning and teaching objectives while implementing new teaching approaches (see Pei, 2008). The collaborative teacher-training program in this investigation encouraged the teachers to create a culture of ongoing teacher discourse that helped them contribute to one another’s learning and respond to the teaching and learning needs in their particular teaching context (Cole, 2012; Johnson, 2009). While being engaged in dialogue and negotiation, the teachers supported each other, looked for new ways of modifying their practices (Engeström & Sannino, 2010), and continued to apply and reflect on their practices and their impact on students’ learning.

Throughout the intervention, the teachers benefited from the facilitator’s support (Aspfors et al., 2015). As an insider with knowledge of the education system and professional development in Iran, the facilitator knew that collaborative teacher learning was not a common practice. In addition, the facilitator was aware of the nature of summer school, knowing that it would provide a suitable experimental context. The teachers’ professional learning was facilitated by the summer course as this allowed the teachers to accommodate curriculum innovations freed from the constraints and demands of the regular academic year teaching periods. As an outsider, she was able to guide and facilitate change in the teachers’ practices while recognising tensions in the teachers’ practices (Scull & Johnson, 2000). The facilitator encouraged the teachers to develop a small learning community and supported them in the process of collective problem solving. She provided space for the follow-up group negotiation and reflection, which gave the teachers opportunities to implement small changes over the intervention (Goodyear, 2017; Mann & Walsh, 2013). She made suggestions, but allowed teachers the freedom to adapt these suggestions based on their class contexts, or to innovate and offer each other solutions to the practical issues that arose. The support the teachers received from the facilitator, as a mentor, created a framework through which a better understanding of teachers’ learning needs was achieved and matched to the individual needs of teachers (Onchwari & Keengwe, 2010).

While effective teacher development often best occurs in school settings, teachers’ workloads, lack of time to be involved in collaborative and collegial discussions, and their lack of motivation to review or share their practices or to seek their colleagues’ advice impede professional learning (Buğra & Wyatt, 2020, 2020; Johnson, 2009; Maloney & Konza, 2011;
Wyatt & Dikilitas, 2016). In this study, site-based collaboration improved due to the high level of trust that encouraged the teachers to assume greater responsibility for revisiting their practices and improving their students’ outcomes (Borko et al., 2010; Buğra & Wyatt, 2020). Yet, such collaborative practices were not without challenges. After the three teachers began to engage with the reform initiatives, they found the idea of group work problematic, and were resistant to aspects of student collaboration and cooperative learning (Saberi & Amiri, 2016). Alongside experimentation and the integration of new practices, there was a tendency to retain or revert back their familiar, pre-existing practices. For example, because the planned speaking activities did not seem to be sufficiently practised or achieve the desired result in Simin’s class at the start of the intervention, she assumed a more passive role, refrained from further participation, and returned to her previous practices as an alternative activity (Maloney & Konza, 2011; Shakhsi Dastgahian, 2021). However, the collegial support she received encouraged her to re-engage with the new activities.

As members of a small learning community, the teachers began to examine, negotiate and share their perceptions, knowledge and practices (Buğra & Wyatt, 2020; Darling-Hammond et al., 2017; Maloney & Konza, 2011). They discussed the issues they faced, reflected upon them and negotiated solutions to address issues based on the needs of their students (Beighton, 2016; Buğra & Wyatt, 2020; Johnson, 2009). In working together, sharing and accepting joint responsibility for resolving the issues that they faced, and while thinking together about the impact of their practices on their students’ learning, the teachers learned from each other as well as with each other (Borko et al., 2010). For meaningful change to occur and for teachers to explore options and alternate ways of operating in their classrooms, teachers need to be challenged to confront concerns and issues openly and honestly. This requires time dedicated to practice and reflection. In this study, the teachers continued working together, were able to share their successes and failures, and developed a supportive network that encouraged experimentation (Scull & Johnson, 2000).

The teachers’ engagement in the intervention and iterative reflection and problem solving appeared to be associated with a change in their beliefs on experimenting with new models of practice (Boyd & Ash, 2018; see also Borg, 2006). As they took control of the change process, they became more invested in the process of reform and set new priorities for teaching. Time allowed the teachers to identify their needs and to plan and trial the reforms. As a result, minor changes such as the teachers’ engagement with new speaking practices and an increase in their desire to allow for more student-centred speaking practices occurred. This, in turn, was reported by the teachers to help improve their students’ proficiency in spoken English as well as the teachers’ autonomy in directing the changes to their teaching. The teachers became agentive learners who attempted to manage the change process through adaptation of curriculum to facilitate their students’ progress. Their capacity for the development of their practices was found to improve over the intervention as they rethought their beliefs and practices and actively looked for new ways to revise their practices (Borg, 2013; McNaughton & Lai, 2009; Shakhsi Dastgahian, 2021).

6. Conclusion

This study has highlighted key principles for curriculum reform aligned with teacher professional learning. The idea that professional learning requires collaboration,
dialogue and teacher investment in the process of change was reinforced (Buğra & Wyatt, 2020; Darling-Hammond et al., 2017). In contexts where transmission models of professional learning dominate, yet are often weak in effect (Saberi & Amiri, 2016), this intervention demonstrated the power of teacher engagement and agency. Through a process of collaborative negotiation, the teachers were able to improve both their effectiveness and efficiency, enhancing the quality of their teaching as ideas were shared and teaching and learning strategies developed (Borko et al., 2010).

This study has implications for the implementation of reform policies and for the role of small learning communities in schools in contexts like Iran where traditional teacher-learning programs and approaches are dominant. As evident in the results reported, teachers can be supported by professional learning facilitators, as well as their colleagues within school settings, to initiate and embed change related to top-down reform initiatives. However, for reform initiatives to be adopted, there needs to be provision for ongoing support for teachers to further develop and refine their skills and continue to connect teaching programs to the specific learning needs of their students.

In addition, the study has implications for the development of professional learning that draws on both insider and outsider knowledge. In this investigation, the facilitator was an insider who had knowledge and a deep understanding of the school culture and context in Iran. As an outsider, she offered new insights and practices, while valuing the teachers’ perspectives and experiences. Importantly, professional learning facilitators can both support and challenge teachers through the process of change (Aspfors et al., 2015; Borko et al., 2010).

Finally, the study suggests the need for high levels of resourcing in order to ensure teachers’ participation and collaboration in professional learning at schools during the academic year. This is required to overcome the factors that inhibit change. Many teachers may be reluctant to share their practices (Cole, 2012; Wyatt & Dikilitas, 2016), and hesitant to seek their colleagues’ advice, fearing that this may have a negative impact on their ongoing employment. Intensified teacher workloads and the differences observed between the outcomes of different classes may also add to the challenges of collective professional learning. However, teachers may overcome these issues if they receive incentives or high levels of support over extended periods of time (Scull & Johnson, 2000). In this study, the teachers were allocated time and received administrative support, with the school principal a strong advocate for the project, seeing it as a means to improve English language teaching and learning. The onus, thus, remains on the provision of multiple forms of school-based support for teachers to persevere through reform processes and collectively overcome tensions as they revise pedagogical practices appropriate to their work settings.

Disclosure statement

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