The Interconnection between Individually Guided Professional Development Activities and the Emergence of Autonomous Teachers

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ABSTRACT: *The purpose of this study is to examine the interrelationship between individually guided professional development activities and the emergence of autonomous teachers. To gather the intended data, a questionnaire was administered with 60 EFL teachers working at school of foreign languages offour different state universities in Turkey. Subsequent to the administration of the questionnaire, a semi-structured interview was conducted with the participants on the purpose of gaining deeper insights into the types and effects of professional development activities they attended during the year 2014, and to what extent they perceive themselves autonomous with respect to their professional development. The findings revealed that even though the participants do not perceive themselves autonomous regarding their professional development, they think that there is a strong interconnection between individually guided professional development activities and the emergence of autonomous teachers.*

Keywords: *Autonomous teacher, professional development, individually guided professional development activities, continuing professional development*

I.   Introduction

Considering the ever-changing constituents having impact upon teaching profession, continuing aspiration and obligation for professional development appears to be indisputably indispensible in teaching profession. Portrayal of teachers by Borg (2003, p. 81) as "active, thinking decision makers who make instructional choices by drawing on complex, practically oriented, personalised, and context-sensitive networks of knowledge, thoughts, and beliefs" is a demonstration of teachers' responsive nature to the demanding variations in their profession such as the changes in context, the institution, students, students' needs and so forth. Such never-ending changes bring about the requirement for teacher professional development.

Teacher professional development is described by Avalos (2011) as the endeavours of teachers to learn how to learn, and to integrate that knowledge into their teaching. Professional development has been interpreted in different ways as to its scope, in other words concerning the inclusion of initial preparatory phase. Johnson &Golombek (2011) widen the framework of professional development to pre-service education, whereas Richards & Farrell (2005) handle it as any sort of initiatives taken to enhance teaching practice subsequent to initial teacher training. Despite the existence of varied stances on the borders of teacher development, the point to which attention needs to be attributed is the perpetuation of development.

Kelchnetermans (as cited in Tang & Choi, 2009) defines continuing professional development as a learning process emerging from purposeful interaction with context, which results in alterations both in teachers' practice and in their perceptions of practice. A number of scholars (Dolan, 2012; Nicholls, 2010;Schugurensky & Myers, 2013; Toomey et. al., 2005)emphasise that becoming a teacher necessitates a lifelong learning process, which can be conceived as the underlying notion of the concept of continuing professional development.

The driving force for practitioners to engage into professional development activities is designated by Karabenick &Noda (2004) as the vital role played by these activities to augment the teaching practice and keep up with the latest knowledge in the field. Richard & Farrell (2005) voice the rationale behind the enterprises undertaken to renew the professional skills and knowledge as the necessity to pursue permanently changing 'knowledge base of teaching'. Conceiving the common view in the literature about the irrefutable requisite for continuing professional development, it seems to be essential to explore the level of teachers' participation at each phase of conducted professional development activities subsuming decision making, implementation, reflection and evaluation.

Koç (1992) puts forward that the needs of teachers are to be viewed as the basis upon which in-service training activities can be constructed. Unless teachers' needs, the difficulties faced by them while teaching are kept in view prior to taking steps to accommodate them with professional development programmes, benefiting from the programmes appears to be unlikely. Therefore, the success of professional development activities is linked to the extent to which they are grounded upon teachers' needs (Ekşi & Aydın, 2012). Brinkerhoff & Gill (as cited

in Lohman & Woolf, 2001) maintain that approximately %90 percent of new learning is acquired as an outcome of self-initiated activities rather than the activities organized and conducted by the institution away from the workplace. The contribution of teachers' active involvement in the programmes to the likelihood of achieving success is verbalized by Mulford (2008):

Success is more likely where people act rather than are always reacting, are empowered, involved in decision making through transparent, facilitative and supportive structures and are trusted, respected, encouraged and valued (p.35).

Drawing the attention to the need for change in teachers' role pertaining to professional development from receivers of the transmitted information to the agents of development activities, teacher autonomy surfaces as a phenomenon worth engaging in more comprehensive exploration.

II. Teacher Autonomy

Sergiovanni & Carver (as cited in Kreis & Brockopp, 2001) identify the components of autonomy as control, influence, participation and authority. Short (1994) approaches autonomy from the standpoint of decision making and defines it "as the sense of freedom to make certain decisions". Teacher autonomy has been defined as the ability to increase the quality of teachers' teaching through their own efforts and agency (Jingnan, 2011; Lamb & Reinders, 2008). Wilches (2007) highlights the increasing concern among educational researchers, administrators, policy makers and practitioners in teacher autonomy over the past two decades. Yet, there exists inconsistency in the meanings attributed to teacher autonomy. The multifaceted nature of teacher autonomy has been reflected on the diversified interpretations in the literature tackling teacher autonomy from different angles:

1- Self-directed professional action: teachers may be 'autonomous in the sense of having a strong sense of personal responsibility for their teaching, exercising via continuous reflection and analysis … affective and cognitive control of the teaching process' (Little,1995).
2- Self-directed professional development: The autonomous teacher is 'one who is aware of why, when, where and how pedagogical skills can be acquired in the self-conscious awareness of teaching practice itself' (Tort-Moloney, 1997).
3- Freedom from control by others over professional action or development (Anderson, 1987).

Friedman (1999) specifies curriculum development, teaching and assessment, professional development, and school functioning as the four different areas on which teachers can exercise their autonomy. The dimensions of teacher autonomy identified by McGrath (2000) as 'teacher autonomy for self-directed action or development; teacher autonomy as freedom from control by others' cater for the manifestation of how teacher autonomy has been subjected to various uses with different dimensions. The two dimensions of teacher autonomy proposed by McGrath (2000) are mutually complementary in that self-direction is accompanied by freedom from control and freedom from control is an outcome of self-directed actions taken by teachers (Jingnan, 2011). Smith (2003) has been recognized as one of the prominent scholars having focused upon the multidimensionality of teacher autonomy and he looks upon teacher autonomy as self-directed professional development. Piecing together the incompatible definitions of teacher autonomy, Huang (2005) provides a comprehensive definition as 'teachers' willingness, capacity and freedom to take control of their own teaching and learning'. For the purpose of maintaining consistency in this present study, teacher autonomy will be regarded as self-directed professional development.

In the 1960s the concept of autonomous learning emerged and has been defined as 'the ability to take charge of one's learning' (Holec, 1981). Jingnan (2011) notes that while learner autonomy has been a widely recognized research focus area in ELT, the same amount of attention has not been canalised to teacher autonomy. Viera (as cited in Wilches, 2007) lays stress on the absence of literature reviews in the field of teacher autonomy, which inconveniences the initial generalizations across studies. Leaving aside the substantial discrepancy between the proportion of studies dedicated to learner autonomy and teacher autonomy, a recent assumption has called the attention to the positive correlation between teacher autonomy and learner autonomy; stated in other words, enhancement of teacher autonomy could have its reflection on meliorating learner autonomy (e.g., Benson, 2000; McGrath, 2000). Ramos (2006) argues that autonomous behaviours that are advocated among students have to be exposed to identical treatment among teachers.

III. Teacher Autonomy And Professional Development

Several researchers (e.g. Daoud, 1999; Lamb & Simpson, 2003; Webb, 2002) indicate that teachers can have the chance to enhance their professional competence, awareness of innovative theories and practices via self-directed professional development. Teachers can exercise their autonomy in professionally related education through having the opportunity to exert impact on the content, methods, instructors and the place of the activity (Wilches, 2007).

Active involvement in all of the phases of professional development activities such as making decisions about the content in conjunction with their needs, monitoring and evaluation, might contribute to teacher autonomy with regards to professional development. Rogers (as cited in Stefani & Elton, 2002) claims that adults learn better when they are actively involved in their learning and they internalise what they learn provided that they perceive the learning relevant to their needs. Stefani & Elton (2002) note that the needs of the adult learners arise out of their own practices and the problems that emerge as a result of their practices.

The underlying rationale of constructivist views highlights the significance of teachers' perceptions and beliefs in teachers' learning. Roberts (1998, p. 26) remarks the role of teachers in probing 'training interventions' which is a means in an attempt to assimilate the new information through an interaction with the existing knowledge. According to constructivism learners actively construct meaning when they come across new information (Spiro, 1980). Considering teachers as the learners in their professional development, central role undertaken by teachers in development process does not appear to be unreasonable. Teachers feel more motivated if they are able to choose their goals and the mediums on the way to accomplish these goals (Pitsoe & Maila, 2012).

Taking into consideration the insufficient amount of studies conducted on the interrelationship between self-directed professional development and teacher autonomy, this study attempts to explore the influence of individually guided professional development activities on the emergence of autonomous teachers.

IV. Methodology

This study was conducted as a descriptive study in order to find out answers to the following questions:

1- Are EFL teachers aware of their professional needs?
2- What sorts of professional development activities do EFL teachers engage in to meet their professional needs?
3- To what extent do EFL teachers exercise autonomy in their professional development experiences?
4- Do individually guided professional development activities contribute to the emergence of autonomous teachers?

4.1. Participants

Sixty EFL teachers working in the preparatory schools of four different state universities in Turkey participated in this study. The number of male teachers overwhelmingly outnumbered the number of female teachers (38 male and 12 female). The average age of the participants was between 20 and30.Years of teaching experience of the participants differed between 1 and 35 years. The range of teaching hours showed a variation between 3 and 40 hours, which yielded a mean of 21 hours. While 36 participants hold an MA degree, 16 of the participants are currently enrolled in MA programmes and 26 of them are doctoral students.

Data Collection

With the intention of gathering demographic information about the participants and information about the professional development activities they attended during the year 2012, a background information paper was attached to the questionnaire as its first section. The questionnaire developed by Opher & Pedder (2010) was administered to the participants on the purpose of collecting data about the participants' common learning practices. The questionnaire is comprised of a total of thirteen five-point likert-type questions, which asked participants to rank their responses according to a specified scale (e.g., definitely true, more or less true, neutral, more or less false, definitely false).Following the administration of the questionnaire and the examination of the given answers, a semi-structured interview with twenty of the participants was carried out with a view to supporting the numerical data obtained from the statistical analysis of the questionnaire. Each interview lasted approximately 12 minutes and the responses of the participants were noted down to review them for analysis.

V. Results And Discussion

1- Are EFL teachers aware of their professional needs?

The semi-structured interview provided valuable information about whether the participants were aware of their professional needs. The answers of the participants revealed that all the participants are aware of their professional needs. Common views among the participants are that reaction of the students, success in accomplishing goals and feedback they get from their students are what signal their professional needs. Following extracts exemplify the common comments of the participants:

Participant 1: I can say that I am aware of my professional needs. The reactions of the students during classes raise my consciousness of the areas on which I need to develop myself professionally. For example, I know that I need to develop my skills to be able to teach listening skill better.

Participant 7: I am absolutely aware of the fact that I am not good at teaching vocabulary. However if you ask me what I do to compensate for this deficiency, I have to admit that I am not taking any serious initiatives.

Participant 12: I explore whether or not I achieve the objective of the lesson. The production of the students points at my success or failure at achieving the goal. I keep in sight this information and determine my professional needs.

Participant 4: At the end of each week, I want my students to write a paragraph to evaluate the week, about what they learnt during the week, what they found useful or ineffective, about the areas for which they need my help. Through reviewing the feedback I get from my students every week, I bring out my professional needs.

2- What sorts of professional development activities do EFL teachers engage in to meet their professional needs?

In due course of interview though some of the participants stated that they do not take any initiatives to meet their professional needs, the majority of the participants stated they engage in some professional development activities. The participants explained professional development activities they have participated in:

Participant 18: I attended to a summer school in Utrecht through which I have gained insights into how to teach vocabulary in an effective way.

Participant 5: I have always faced difficulty in improving written production of the students. I have a close friend with whom I can feel comfortable while teaching and I know that he is really good at teaching writing. I invited him to my writing class and requested him to observe me. He took some notes and shared them with me, which have been enlightening for me.

The question of whether the participants participated in professional development activities during the year 2012 and if yes, what sorts of professional development activities they attended to was one of the questions included in the first section of the questionnaire. Table 1 demonstrates the percentage of the participants taking and not taking part in professional development activities during the year 2012. As can be seen from table 1, the number of the participants attending to professional development activities outnumbered the ones with no professional development experience in 2012.

Table 1

In order to find out the practices of the participants with respect to their professional development a questionnaire developed by Opfer & Pedder (2010) was distributed to the participants. The values placed in Table 2 demonstrate that the participants are not inclined to be a part of collaborative or research based practices. This is not in line with the studies depicting the supportive traits of collaborative and research-based practices (Cordingley, Bell, Thomason & Firth, 2005b; Doppenberg, Bakx & Brok, 2012; Levine & Marcus, 2010; Duran, Brunvand, Elssworth & Şendağ, 2012). Internally-oriented professional learning is the prevalently employed learning type. Self-evaluating one's own classroom practices stands out as the common practice among the participants of the study. The mean value of the second item in the questionnaire, experimenting with one's own practice as a conscious strategy with the intention of improving classroom teaching and learning, illustrates the widespread predisposition among the participants to place the highest value on the internally-oriented professional learning.

Table 2 shows that participants' externally-oriented practices such as using the web as a source of useful ideas or modifying the practice under the light of the feedback they get from managers or other colleagues do not signal application as much as the internally oriented ones do. The lowest mean value in Table 2 belongs to carrying out joint research, which also surfaced as the answers of the participants gathered via the semi-structured interview were analysed.

Table 2

The semi-structured interview contains data compatible with the findings attained from the questionnaire. An overwhelming number of the participants noted that they are not involved in collaborative work due to some factors such as the inexistence of an environment of trust in their institution and among their colleagues. They verbalised that using self-evaluation and reflecting on their teaching practices as a means of professional learning arise from that untrustworthy environment. The extracts given below are samples of participants' comments on why they prefer individual work to the collaborative work:

Participant 8: Actually, I want to engage in collaborative activities yet I really do not count on my colleagues. I do not think they are sincere enough to work and develop professionally together. If I do something wrong, they will definitely criticise me.

Participant 17: I can engage in collaborative activities but it totally depends upon with whom I will work. There are few colleagues who can in real terms contribute to my professional development and with whom I can feel comfortable.

3- To what extent do EFL teachers exert autonomy over their professional development activities?
The majority of the participants stated during the interview that particularly in terms of the workshop activities conducted within their institutions their needs are not taken into account, the administrators determine the topic, speakers and time of the workshop activity with no consultation to the teachers, which is also illustrated in Table 3. This finding is in contradiction with the study carried out by Munroz (2007). In the study Munroz (2007) investigated the five Mexican teachers' perceptions of their professional development and its relation to teacher autonomy and found out that participating teachers actively initiated all of the activities to enhance their professional development. However, participants in this particular study stated that out-of-school workshops, seminars, conferences and independent study are the professional development activities on which that they can exert autonomy.
Another important finding that can be obtained from Table 3 is that almost no negotiation exists between the participants and their institutions. This finding contradicts with the view that provided the level of negotiation between the institution and the teachers is high, the probability of success pertinent to the usefulness of professional development activities increases (Cook, 1982; Mark, 1998; Burnstad , Hoss & McHargue, 1993).

Table 3
During the interview, concerning the in-school-workshops and seminars an overwhelming number of the participants emphasized that a needs analysis was not conducted in order for diagnosing their professional needs. The administrators were criticized for not taking the needs of the teachers into consideration and exerting their power on all the phases of the in-school professional development activities. The participating teachers explained their opinions and feelings:

Participant 5: I do not believe that our administrators place value on our needs. If the situation was vice versa, they would at least apparently ask for the areas in which we need professional assistance. I remember only once something like a questionnaire was delivered to the teachers with the aim of detecting our needs. But the topic of the workshop turned out to be different from what we expected considering our needs we specified through the questionnaire. This shows that our needs are not handled seriously and all the workshops are presented to us as a gift. What our institution is not aware is the fact that we are not expecting gifts but real endeavours that can satisfy our professional needs.

Participant 14: We are told that there is a workshop or seminar on a certain date determined by the administration and participation is mandatory. How can they expect effectiveness from such activities? We are not willing participators and just feel bored even if the speaker might be talking about a technique, strategy we have not employed so far. I cannot exert autonomy on such activities; on the contrary, administrators exert their autonomy on us despite the obvious reality that they do not have idea about what I experience in my own classes.

4- Do individually guided professional development experiences contribute to the emergence of autonomous teachers?
In due course of having interviews with the participants, it was understood that the term 'autonomous teachers regarding their professional development' was not clear for the participants. Considering the importance of understanding what is meant by the term on the answers that would be received during the interviews, the researchers explained the meaning of the term as exerting autonomy on any phase of professional development activities. All of the teachers with whom the interview was carried out highlighted that they are not autonomous teachers as to their professional development yet added that if teachers are active participants in the planning, implementation and evaluation phases of any initiatives taken with the intention of contributing to their professional development, the degree to which teachers can benefit from the incentives increases. Opinions of some of the participants are given below:

Participant 3: I am sure that only if we have the opportunity to have a say at all stages of professional development activities, we can exert autonomy on our professional development. Unfortunately, this is not what

we experience at our department especially in terms of in-school-workshop and seminar. We are not asked about our needs and the topic of the activity, the speaker and time of the activity. Not only our institution neglects our needs, but also they never attempt to seek what the teachers think of the usefulness of the activities conducted for our professional growth.

Participant 20: Individually guided professional development activities, without doubt, leads to the emergence of autonomous teachers. I can feel autonomous at least in terms of my professional development let alone autonomy in curriculum implementation and teaching materials if I am the one who makes decisions about the content of professional development activity in that nobody can know my professional needs better than me. But I cannot say that I am an autonomous teacher because I do not take any concrete steps to meet my professional needs of which I am aware.

Participant 16: First, I have to admit that I am not an autonomous teacher professionally. I can say that I am aware of my professional needs through the feedback I receive from my students. If you ask me whether I participate in any professional development activities consciously to enhance my professional development through paying attention to the content of the conferences, workshops and reflecting on what I grasp from the activities and monitor my progress, my answer is no. However, I do certainly believe via taking the control of the activities that can be useful to my professional development, I can become an autonomous teacher.

Participant 8: I am not an autonomous teacher concerning my professional growth. I do not want to blame my institution for this reality because I know that it is of great importance to gain and exert autonomy on professional development activities but I do not show efforts to take responsibility for my professional development. If I took the necessary initiatives to satisfy my needs on the way towards professional development, I would then be an autonomous teacher.

VI. Conclusion

A plethora of research has explored the contribution of the activities either at institutional or individual level to teachers' perpetually evolving professional development. Considering the multifaceted nature of professional development, what appears to carry substantial significance is the role undertaken by teachers themselves in their never-ending professional development. On the condition that institutions are the sole powers in the course of planning, implementing and evaluating the professional development activities as the findings revealed in this study, and no teacher autonomy is existent, the reflections of these activities on the side of teachers might come up as merely wasting time.

This study has investigated an area of teacher autonomy, the interconnection between individually guided professional development activities and the emergence of autonomous teachers, which has been the topic of meagre research. The gathered data indicate that teachers are aware of their professional needs and they engage in a number of professional development activities such as attending to in-school and out-of school-workshops, seminars, conferences, teaching networks et cetera. Nevertheless, the question of the degree to which they exert autonomy on the professional development activities they have taken part in reveal that particularly in the activities conducted by the institution they do not, more clearly, cannot exert autonomy. Lack of negotiation between the administrators and teachers reduces the effectiveness of the activities and decreases the level of willingness among the teachers, and ends up with mandatory participation. The general view among the participants isthat provided they guide the activities carried out with the intent to enhance their professional development, this can lead to the emergence of autonomous teachers.

VII. Suggestions For Further Research

Teaching profession requires keeping up with the latest changes in the field as needed in other professions. Such an irresistible necessity evokes a standpoint that regards all the people in the world as learners. Teachers are learners as well and professional learning appears to be an inescapable reality of teachers. As long as teachers are autonomous in their continuing professional learning, providing sustainment in professional development seems likely.

Further studies can be carried out to investigate the correlation between teacher autonomy and learner autonomy. Unless teachers are autonomous in their professional learning, they might not struggle to instil autonomy into their students and their students' practices to support their lifelong language learning journey.

The participants in this particular study note that they are aware of their professional needs, yet they do not endeavour to meet their needs and in other words hand over the control of their professional development to their institution. This situation might be due to the low level of motivation, burn out, excessive workload, not having adequate knowledge of various professional development activities catering for professional growth.

Further research is required to gain an understanding of the reasons for teachers' not taking initiatives in spite of the heightened awareness they have with respect to their teaching practice and needs.

Further studies can be administered with a view to exploring the effectiveness of possessing autonomy over teaching profession. Autonomous teachers in terms of their professional development can be compared to non-autonomous teachers to find out the differences, if any, between teaching practices of these two teacher groups. By doing so, it could be possible to observe the reflections of teacher autonomy connected to professional development on classroom practices and student learning.

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