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REFLECTIONS ON A TEACHER-LED CPD MODEL FOR EFL TEACHERS

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Abstract

This qualitative case study aims to explore English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers' reflections of a teacher-led professional development (CPD) model conducted at the department of foreign languages of a foundation university in Turkey. It also aims to find out what implications this model might have for the professional development of teachers. The entire population of 35 EFL teachers took part in the study. Data were collected through observations, focus group interviews, document analysis and an evaluation survey. All the qualitative data were interpreted and coded through content analysis. Results of the study revealed that teachers reflected mostly on the process of the model, its implications for their professional development and their suggestions for future CPD practices.

Keywords: EFL teachers, teacher-led professional development, qualitative case study

1. Introduction

Professional development of English language teachers has always been an important issue due to the fact that the field of language teaching is subject to rapid changes (Richards & Farrell, 2005) which inevitably affects the way teachers teach. For teachers to keep up with these changes and vary their teaching methods, they need to update their knowledge and skills in language teaching. Therefore, they need CPD opportunities. However, it is a well-known fact that traditional professional development activities often provide insufficient opportunities for teacher learning (Atay, 2007; Fiszer, 2004). What is rightly termed by Fiszer (2004, p.5) as “prepackaged professional development” with a “quick-fix” mentality seems to be of limited value for teachers who experience issues with their classroom practices and are in need of special solutions relating to their own teaching context (Küçüksüleymanoğlu, 2006). CPD models which regard teachers as “consumers of knowledge” (Borg, 2015, p.5) have several drawbacks. When teachers are offered a professional development opportunity that is conveyed by means of top-down teacher training strategies, the result is lack of ownership of the program (Korkmazgil & Seferoğlu, 2013; Uysal 2012) because as pointed out by Diaz-Maggioli (2004, p.2) “teachers rightly question their investment in programs that were built behind their backs yet are aimed at changing the way they do things.”

To change this tendency to design CPD in an externally-driven way, it seems obvious that we need to create a school culture that supports teacher-led professional development. Schools need to provide their teachers with a rich and varied ongoing program of activities which will support them to reflect upon and develop their own practice. (Allison, 2014). Borko, Jacobs and Koellner (2010) highlight that if we want schools to offer more powerful learning opportunities for students, we must offer more powerful learning opportunities for teachers. In their article, Stein, Smith and Silver (1999) contrast old paradigms for

professional development with new paradigms and they emphasize that there needs to be a shift from one-shot, externally driven practices to contemporary ones that aim to help teachers to better understand subject matter, pedagogy, and student thinking. Current literature on CPD puts great emphasis on models that enable teachers to work collaboratively and construct knowledge to be used in their own context (Borko et al., 2010). Therefore, it seems obvious that instead of more CPD practices in which teachers are conceived as “consumers of knowledge”, we are in need of CPD opportunities which regard teachers as “knowledge generators” and help them develop themselves as such professionals (Borg, 2015, p. 5). Reviews of literature (Ashburn, 1995; Harris & Anthony, 2001; Richards & Farrell, 2005) have suggested that for CPD practices to achieve this, they should have the following characteristics;

- Relevant to the needs of the teachers and students,
- Focused on student learning,
- Job-embedded,
- Research-oriented,
- Collaborative,
- Reflective

Features listed above are likely to manifest themselves in certain forms of CPD such as Lesson Study, Team Teaching, Action Research, and Reflective Teaching and Learning. As suggested by Tsui and Law (2007) Lesson Study provides teachers with a safe environment where they can work in collaboration, thereby supporting teacher self-efficacy and self-confidence. Similar to Lesson Study, Team Teaching also offers teachers a supportive environment which helps teachers working in teams overcome teacher isolation and foster teacher intellectual development (Goetz, 2000). Action Research, on the other hand, is known to help teachers improve their teaching through reflective, evaluative thinking and practice (Brown & Macatangay, 2002). Richards and Lockhart (1996) highlight the importance of reflective teaching and suggest that if teachers are engaged in activities enabling them to reflect on their classroom practices, they will be in a position to identify the gap between what they teach and what their students learn.

Although much is known about how teachers perceive traditional CPD models, only a few studies mention how teacher-led CPD models are perceived by teachers. Therefore, this qualitative case study aims to explore teachers’ reflections of a teacher-led professional development model conducted at the department of foreign languages (DFL) of a privately funded university. It also aims to find out what implications this model might have for the professional development of teachers.

2. Method

When little is known about an issue, a qualitative approach might help a researcher better understand the phenomena in question (Hancock & Algozzine, 2006). Therefore, this study was designed as case study research. Case study which helps researchers investigate a little-understood event, situation or circumstance is a detailed analysis of an individual or a group of people (Fraenkel, Wallen & Hyun, 2012). This qualitative case study was carried out during four academic terms (2015-2017) at the DFL of a foundation university in Turkey. The study aimed to answer the research question “*How do EFL teachers reflect on a teacher-led CPD program?*”

2.1. Research Context and Participants

This study was conducted in a foundation university in Turkey with the participation of 35 EFL teachers who teach general and academic English to undergraduate students at the DFL. The profile of the teachers working at the university is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. *Teacher profile at DFL*

		F	%
Gender	Female	26	74.3
	Male	9	25.7
Age	24 -	8	22.9
	25-29	18	51.4
	30-39	7	20.0
	40 +	2	5.7
Major	English Language Teaching	25	71.4
	English Language & Literature	5	14.3
	Linguistics	1	2.9
	Translation & Interpretation	1	2.9
	American Culture & Literature	1	2.9
	Psychology	1	2.9
	Government & Public Policies	1	2.9
M.A. Degree	In progress	20	57.1
	Completed	8	22.9
	None	7	20.0
Teaching	0-1	7	20.0
Experience	2-4	16	45.7
	5-9	8	22.9
	10 +	4	11.4

Up to 2015, CPD activities at the DFL were externally-driven and delivered in the form of courses, seminars and workshops. The in-house evaluations of those CPD practices revealed that teachers were mostly dissatisfied with the way their professional needs were addressed. Therefore, starting as of the second term of 2015-2016 academic year, a new approach to CPD was adopted in which teachers were encouraged to take responsibility of their own professional learning and development by improving themselves as reflective practitioners. In this approach, teachers were first introduced to four CPD practices; Lesson Study, Team Teaching, Action Research and Reflective Teaching and Learning through introductory courses and provided with additional reading materials so that they could refer to whenever they wanted to learn more about a certain practice. Teachers were, later on, encouraged to choose one practice that they wished to try out during an academic term. Upon choosing a practice, they started working together with a facilitator who provided teachers with necessary assistance and guidance so that they could follow the procedures of the chosen practice. Facilitators were chosen among voluntary experienced teachers who were qualified to offer quality guidance to their colleagues. Teachers working in groups with a facilitator first identified their own professional needs and designed a professional development plan which stated in detail what they wanted to focus on and how they aimed to achieve their professional development goal. Following this, they carried out the procedures of the practice by holding regular meetings and writing reflective reports. At the end of the term, they

presented what they did over the course of the term within the scope of the CPD model they had chosen and reflected on how it helped them improve themselves as professionals. Teacher presentations were shared with the rest of the teaching staff at an in-house event called ELT Fusion named and organized by teachers themselves. Figure 1 outlines the process a teacher goes through each term.

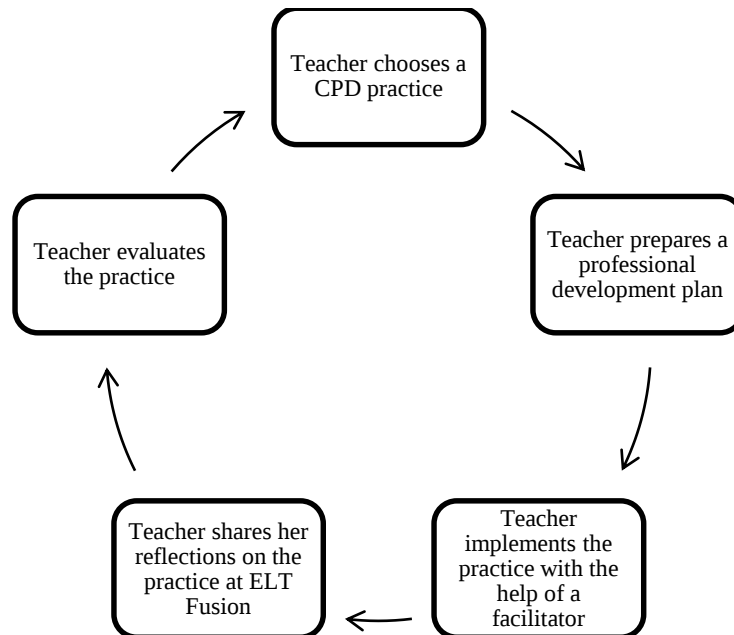


Figure 1. The process of the teacher-led CPD model

2.2. Data Collection and Analysis

Data for the study were collected through observations, focus group interviews, document analysis and an evaluation survey. Researchers in this study either facilitated some of the four CPD practices or observed a facilitator helping their colleagues carry out the practice. During the implementation of the practice, teachers wrote reflective reports which were archived by the researchers. At the end of each term, focus groups interviews were held with voluntary teachers. These meetings were audio recorded and transcribed later on. In addition to focus group interviews, an evaluation survey designed by researchers were conducted as soon as the ELT Fusion was over. Data from these surveys were also analyzed. Figure 2 shows the data collection process.

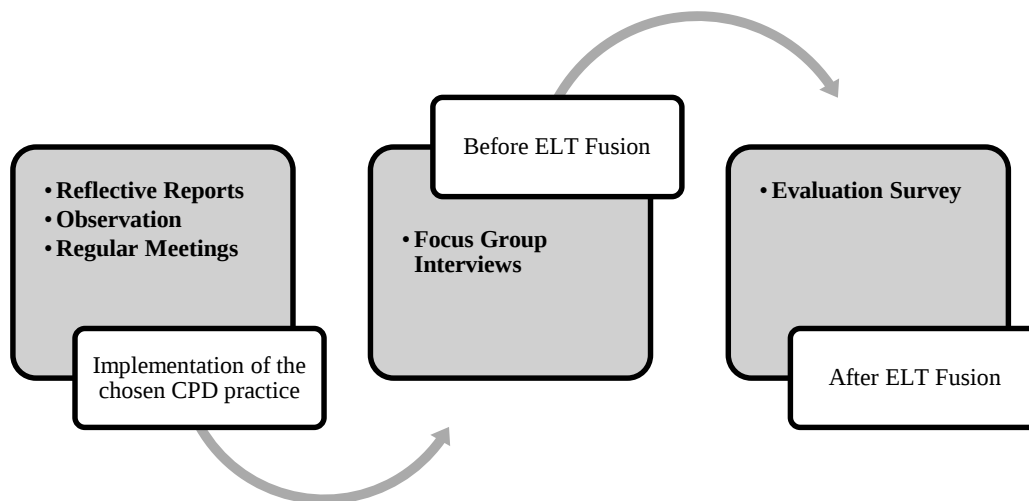


Figure 2. Data collection process

All data gathered throughout the study were combined and made ready for analysis. Two copies of the data set were made and each set was separately analyzed by the researchers with MAXQDA10 through repeated readings. Upon deciding on the emerging codes and categories, researchers determined the common themes linked to the research question. The codes, categories, themes and quotations were shared with the participants and they were asked if they agreed with the findings of the study.

3. Findings and Discussion

The analysis of the qualitative data revealed that teachers' responses could be grouped under three headings: *reflections on the process of the model*, *reflections on professional development* and *suggestions for future CPD practices*.

3.1. Reflections on the Process

The findings of the study indicated that almost every teacher expressed his/her views regarding the proper implementation of the whole CPD model. Analysis of the data revealed that most of the teachers reflected on the guidance they took from the facilitator and the weekly meetings regularly held with either the facilitator or other group members, acknowledging that these meetings considerably benefitted them in terms of their professional development.

The Facilitator's Guidance. Data analysis showed that the teachers found the facilitator's guidance on the process very helpful as for introducing the CPD practice and related theory, organizing the meetings, helping them with time management and lesson planning. In response to the question "*Do you think the process was handled properly in terms of the guidance you received?*" many teachers stated that the facilitator played an important role throughout the process. For instance, one teacher who participated in Reflective Teaching and Learning remarked that the facilitator with both her attitude and knowledge provided the teacher with sufficient guidance to implement the process properly. She said:

My facilitator had such an attitude that she made me go further and motivated all the time with her leading and guiding feedback. Also, she did not interfere in my lessons while recording the lesson.

Being just as an observer, she did not affect my teaching much in the class. Moreover, by giving me really useful and to the point articles she led me to improve myself both theoretically and practically. (Teacher 1, Reflective Teaching and Learning)

I believe that the process was handled properly during the term in relation to guidance I received because in this process, my facilitator was a great supporter, problem-solver, collaborator, coach, and a trustworthy listener for me. Thanks to her guidance, I didn't experience any problem. (Teacher 17, Lesson Study)

Moreover, the findings suggested that the feedback and guidance received during the process facilitated lesson planning and in-class teaching for some teachers. The following are typical of the teachers' reflections on the facilitator's guidance:

I think that the process was handled properly thanks to the facilitator of our team. During the term, we held meetings and gave feedback to each other every week. With the help of the guidance of my facilitator during the meetings, we could plan our next lesson well. (Teacher 3, Team Teaching)

She [the facilitator] supported me in my practice and shared her experiences with me. She also helped me to internalize what I've learned and to apply it in my own classroom. (Teacher 17, Lesson Study)

It should be noted that the terms "facilitator" and "mentor" have been used interchangeably by the teachers in our study. Thus, these findings confirm the claims of those (Guskey, 2002; Kennedy, 2005; Malderez & Bodoczky, 1999) who suggest that mentors in CPD programs can become role models, supporters and educators with great potential to inspire, show and encourage teachers to accomplish their professional targets. A non-threatening environment and a mentor with good communication skills can help establish a productive professional relationship between the teacher and mentor.

Collegiality through Weekly Meetings. The data indicated that the meetings that were held regularly during the term were found useful by the teachers in helping them to keep the process going in a more organized way, give feedback to each other, share ideas as well as planning the next lesson with the help of the reflective discussions. A teacher in the Action Research team reflected on the weekly meetings stating that "*We had meetings during which we planned every step, prepared lesson plans and reflected on our experience in detail*". It emerged from the findings that the teachers benefitted from the meetings particularly in terms of their contribution to initiating reflection, raising their awareness of their strengths and weaknesses, developing their teaching skills in addition to planning the next lesson. Another teacher who did Team Teaching remarked that "*In the meetings, we gave a lot of valuable feedback to each other and this helped me become aware of my abilities and the areas that need improvement*". Similarly, one of the teachers who took part in Lesson Study mentioned that the meetings were helpful for her to improve her teaching skills due to the guidance received in the meetings from the peers and facilitator. She said that "*All the time, the process was facilitated by the guidance I received. Both peer meetings and facilitator meetings helped me a lot to enhance my teaching skills. Our meetings helped me in terms of sharing ideas and finding new ones*".

It appears that collegial support and reflective discussions with peers in the weekly meetings affected the teachers in several ways. This finding is consistent with many of the characteristics that Borg (2015) suggests regarding the principles of effective CPD programs. Borg (2015) highlights that effective CPD should enable teachers to work together, get involved in decision-making and do classroom-based research. Thus, programs which incorporate reflection groups can offer teachers opportunities for collaboration, exploration and reflection with special consideration for practices and beliefs. Accordingly, the weekly meetings in the program seemed to provide conditions where the teachers were able to develop collaborative, reflective and practical thinking and practices that helped with their classroom instruction.

3.2. Reflections on Professional Development

Data analysis revealed three areas with which the teachers acknowledged the progress they made as a result of the CPD practice. The findings revealed that the teachers associated their professional development with *self-reflection*, *teacher collaboration* and *improvement in teaching practice*.

Self-reflection. The findings of the study suggested that the CPD practice in which the teachers participated provided them with the opportunity to question their strengths and weaknesses through reflection. The teachers drew attention to the development in their teaching practice as a consequence of becoming aware of the areas they were really good at as well as the areas which needed more attention and improvement. One of the teachers who had her lessons video-recorded confirmed this by saying that “*I had a chance to observe myself [my lesson] several times. Getting ideas and comments on my lesson from my facilitator and peers made me aware of my weaknesses and reflect on my teaching as a teacher*”. The following comments are also consistent with the previous comment:

I am now more aware of who I am and how I teach in the classroom. I can say that this program has broadened my horizons by providing me with details about my idea of teaching. (Teacher 8, Reflective Teaching and Learning)

My awareness about my teaching skills, strengths and weaknesses has increased. Now, after each lesson I reflect on my teaching; for example, I ask myself if I could give clear and effective instructions in my lesson. (Teacher 15, Reflective Teaching and Learning Program)

This experience helped me a lot in terms of being a more aware teacher. To know myself more as a teacher made me worried in the very beginning. However, it gradually started to make me feel good to focus on something that I need to improve. I watched myself as an outsider and I realized my teaching habits, which makes me more aware, again. (Teacher 21, Action Research)

The results also showed that the procedures followed in the whole CPD model triggered self-reflection by leading the teachers to think about their teaching practice and what actions to take for the next class. Reflection seemed to be activated particularly by self-observation and peer observation. To demonstrate, two of the teachers spoke about this as follows:

I believe self-observation has raised my consciousness about what is going on in the classroom. This experience gave me the chance to reflect on my lessons and monitor them. Therefore, I was able to evaluate my teaching after watching the video recording. (Teacher 4, Reflective Teaching and Learning)

By observing my teammates, I was encouraged to think about my instruction and teaching practices before going forward to the next step (Teacher 6, Team Teaching)

Data revealed that the teachers’ ascribed development of self-reflection mostly to the self and peer observation, which seemed to expand their awareness of their strengths and weaknesses regarding their instructional process. In line with this, the literature (Gün, 2010; Richards, 1990; Richards & Farrell, 2005;) confirms that self-observation can help with critical reflection about the teacher’s work and assists teachers in better understanding of their instructional practices by closing the gap between what they actually do and what they think they do. Moreover, peer observation is likely to activate reflection about one’s own teaching where the observer and/or mentor might give an impersonal view of the lesson and collect information the teacher might not be able to collect on her own.

Teacher Collaboration. Some teachers remarked that the CPD practice encouraged collaboration among their colleagues. Particularly, those who performed CPD practices such as Action Research, Lesson Study and Team Teaching mentioned that teacher collaboration with respect to observing each other’s lessons, co-planning, teaching and evaluating was fostered. The teachers reflected that collaboration also influenced how well the procedures

were implemented in the group. Effective implementation of the practice was attributed to the good collaboration among colleagues. One of the teachers asserted that “*as we had very good collaboration in our group, we carried out all the procedures well*”. In the same vein, another teacher spoke about the development of collaborative skills by means of the CPD practice she implemented as follows:

This process was very helpful for me to develop collaborative skills since our study was completely a product of our teamwork. This CPD activity also served as a peer-observation. My colleagues visited my class, observed my teaching, my students' performance as well as the flow of the lesson. After the lesson, the debriefing session that we had altogether made me reflect on how I taught as well as how the lesson went. (Teacher 23, Lesson Study)

In addition, another teacher who did Team Teaching reflected on how the CPD practice ended up with enhanced collaboration although she had hard time getting used to collaborative work at the beginning of the semester. She said:

Although it was a bit difficult to get used to working as a team at the beginning especially in planning, it turned into an effective collaboration in the second and last lessons, not only in planning but also in class. We were supporting and complementing each other naturally while preparing the lesson plans or managing the lesson itself. (Teacher 30, Team Teaching)

This is in line with the literature on effective professional development activities (Borg, 2015; Broad & Evans, 2006; Daloğlu, 2004; Harris & Anthony, 2001; Rose & Reynolds, 2009;) all of which include teacher collaboration as one of the key elements that can unite teachers for a common purpose, help them learn from each other, share decision making and solve problems together. Within a collaborative school culture, teachers are believed to attempt learning more as well as gathering and sharing data on teaching and learning. It is emphasized that collaboration, peer support and reflective practice are important for “school change, the quality of instruction, student achievement, and a more professional learning community” (Şahin, 2011, p.602) in addition to teachers’ professional development.

Improving teaching practice. The data from the study indicated that many teachers reflected on improvement in their teaching practice regarding giving instructions, designing creative materials, teacher talking time and checking understanding. The teachers mentioned that lesson observations, receiving feedback from their peers and the facilitator’s guidance assisted in raising their awareness of how to manage the lesson more effectively. One of the teachers who took part in Reflective Teaching and Learning spoke about the improvement in his teaching practice as follows:

Reflective Teaching helped me to see some of the weaknesses in my teaching from another point of view and we worked on these problems with my facilitator. I could realize the problems in my instructions and I guess I could make some improvement in giving clear and specific instructions. I can also say that this experience helped me prepare more student-centered activities. In the future, I will make some adaptations to the activities in the course book and bring more enjoyable activities from time to time rather than teaching merely from the course book. (Teacher 22, Reflective Teaching and Learning)

This finding was confirmed by another teacher who agreed that she received a lot of help from her facilitator with respect to giving instructions and put what she learned and read into practice in her lessons. She said:

First of all, I focused on the certain teaching areas that I need help and improvement. I did lots of readings and learned new techniques that can be used in the class in an effective way and I implemented them in the class. More specifically, I thought more and more and reflected on the area of giving instructions. With the help of my mentor, I learned some strategies and things to keep in mind while giving instructions. I tried to implement them in the class and saw the effectiveness of them and I became more and more aware of the importance of giving instructions. (Teacher 14, Lesson Study)

Another teacher Team Teaching for three months expressed her improvement in reducing teacher talking time and how she accomplished this stating that:

I believe I became better at arranging my talking time. To illustrate this, when my partner had the mentioned issue, I preferred not to talk more to balance the talking time in class. (Teacher 3, Team Teaching)

In addition, improvement in checking understanding was pointed out by some of the teachers who acknowledged showing progress in this particular area as follows:

Probably, most of us proceed with the next section [in a lesson] without checking students' understanding as we go through the stages regardless of the allocated time for that stage. I used to proceed without checking, though I could manage a good transition. Now, this study taught me how important checking understanding is, otherwise you cannot entirely ensure students' learning. (Teacher 29, Reflective Teaching and Learning)

One of the teachers referred to checking understanding as “evidence of learning” and she wrote with regard to her development in this area as “another point I realized was that checking the students' understanding was an indispensable part of this process as it was the evidence of learning, but I was not aware of that crucial fact before the practice”. All these comments indicate that the CPD practices provided the teachers with the chance to focus on their teaching (Richards & Farrell, 2005), which also led to an increase in their pedagogical knowledge (Cordingley, Bell, Rundell & Evans, 2003). Particularly, by doing self-observation and peer observation, the teachers seemed to gather data about teaching and classroom processes and have an opportunity to get feedback on their own teaching. According to Meirink, Meijer & Verloop (2007), teachers, by sharing knowledge and experience, can change, adjust or improve their teaching practice as well as extending and supplementing their own beliefs.

3.3. Suggestions for Future CPD Practices

In response to the question “How do you think ELT Fusion would be improved for future events?”, it was found that most of the teachers were dissatisfied with the number of reflective reports they were supposed to write during the term. The findings suggested that a lot of paperwork was demotivating and time consuming for the teachers besides their daily teaching load. Reflecting on how this practice could be improved, one teacher said that “If we can simplify the paperwork about the process and conduct it in a more informal way, it would be better; with this way, I believe I can benefit it more.” In line with this, two other teachers focused on the necessity for more flexibility regarding reflective reports and all other paperwork, complaining about the workload they already had in their teaching routine. They said:

Those studies should be more flexible and it would be much better and motivating if the workload of the CPD activities such as paperwork, reflection forms can be reduced since we have a lot of things to be considered during the periods in terms of lessons. (Teacher 2, Team Teaching)

The procedures of the program should be flexible. There is lots of paperwork. We have done a detailed study and written a very detailed report in a short time in the end as if we prepared a thesis. Thus, this causes so much workload especially during the academic semester while we had 20 hours of teaching load a week. (Teacher 7, Lesson Study)

For many teachers, daily workload is inherent in their profession; therefore, sharing good practice with colleagues and applying it in their lessons might not be of great value when their workload is considered (Galton & Pell, 2009; Richards & Farrell, 2005). To avoid this, the number of the additional paperwork in the CPD programs might be reduced and teachers' suggestions for future practice should be taken into consideration so that they will not feel discouraged by the amount of the work they are supposed to complete during the process.

4. Implications for Future Practice

The findings of our study can make contribution to the planning, implementation and evaluation of the future teacher-led CPD models for in-service teachers. The findings reveal that it is important for teachers to be supported throughout the process by a facilitator or a mentor who may assist with her professional expertise as well as listening and encouraging teachers to achieve their professional goals. Within the scope of a teacher-led CPD model, it is understood that the teachers in our study appreciated the mentor support during the process as well as their agreeable and understanding attitude towards them. Thus, teacher trainers or those who are in charge of running CPD programs in schools should consider integrating mentoring system into their current CPD activities, particularly to support novice teachers along the way with assistance from a more knowledgeable person.

It also seems that the collegiality through weekly meetings in the program paved the way for raising teachers' awareness, encouraging reflective discussions, co-planning of the lessons and keeping the process going in a more organized way. This highlights that meetings can provide the conditions for more collegial sharing, support and empathy between colleagues as long as they are conducive to teachers' schedule for their participation. Therefore, we recommend that in either individual or collaborative CPD activities, facilitators, teacher trainers or teachers themselves hold regular meetings with their colleagues to establish a platform where they can listen to each other, share ideas and practice in addition to solving problems together. This might also help enhance collaboration and solidarity among the staff.

The findings demonstrate that the teacher-led CPD model that we designed and implemented within the context of our study can trigger self-reflection, encourage teacher collaboration and improve teaching practice. Since all of these outcomes are regarded as the essential elements of effective CPD programs, we can suggest that teacher trainers, mentors or administrators in other schools design similar in-house CPD programs with respect to the immediate needs of their teachers, resources and contextual realities. Since teachers' voluntariness and active participation is a must for all professional development, we believe that teachers should be involved in the decision-making process while designing, implementing and evaluating such programs. Moreover, teacher feedback regarding the process, practice and outcomes of the program should regularly and objectively be taken in order to design future programs in light of their views. This would also demonstrate that teachers' opinions are valued, respected and appreciated for the creation of a future program.

We also know that professional development requires motivation, time and effort of all those who are involved in the process. In addition to teachers' daily teaching load, participation to a CPD program and its requirements may pose another challenge to teachers among many other responsibilities. Taking this fact into consideration, we suggest that CPD practices should be designed in a way that would keep the balance between teachers' daily teaching workload and the workload required to participate in professional development activities.

It should also be noted that regardless of the role taken during the process- a teacher, mentor, facilitator or an administrator-, teaching as a profession should be done at the highest quality to foster student learning. To achieve quality, CPD is the key that would lead to excellence in profession. However, before initiating any CPD model or program, we believe that schools should primarily aim at creating their own professional development philosophy with the participation of teachers in decision-making and evaluation processes. This collectively established philosophy would gradually form a sound basis for all the other teaching and learning activities carried out in a school environment.

5. Conclusion

This case study examines how 35 in-service EFL teachers reflect on the teacher-led CPD model conducted at a foundation university in Turkey for four academic terms. The results suggest that the teachers' reflections on the CPD program gathered around the implementation of the model with respect to the guidance received from the facilitator and the collegiality through weekly meetings. The results further suggest that the teachers reflected on the model's contribution to their professional development as for enhancing self-reflection, collaboration in addition to improving their teaching practice. Finally, this study highlights the teachers' suggestions regarding the implementation of the future CPD activities that recommend a reduced number of reflective reports which seemed to put additional burden on teachers' daily workload in school.

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