

In-Service Teacher Development Programs and EFL Teaching Practice in High Schools

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Abstract

This study sought the relationship between short-term in-service development programs for EFL teachers and their teaching practice in high schools. The objectives were to determine the relationship between: 1) the components of the programs for EFL teachers and their practice in class, and 2) EFL teachers' perception of the programs and their practice in class. Data were collected through questionnaires and an observation checklist, using a quantitative research method with a descriptive design and cross-sectional approach. Participants included 312 EFL teachers from Esfahan high schools, and 46 English teachers were observed. Findings on the participants' gender, academic qualification, age, and teaching experience indicated there was no significant difference in the content of the programs between male/female teachers, whereas there was a significant difference between BA and MA holders among the 3 age groups and the 3 experienced groups. Findings in general show that there is no significant relationship between: 1) the components of the programs and the approaches utilized in class, and 2) EFL teachers' perception of the programs and the approaches utilized in class.

Keywords: *EFL teacher development programs, Content components (CCs), Teachers' perceptions (TPs), Teaching approach (TA)*

1. Introduction

Globalization, expansion of information technologies, and global communication requirements leave no choice but English as an International Language (EIL) for people speaking different languages in different contexts (Brown, 2007, pp. 203-6). Due to this situation, the universal second language, English as the lingua franca of the world (ELF), has resulted in English being taught and learned in various contexts, as represented in Kachru's World Englishes (WEs).

Jenkins (2006) refers to WEs as the "indigenized varieties" of English in the local contexts. Various contexts that are mainly derived from Kachru's circles (i.e., the Inner Circle, the Outer Circle, and the Expanding Circle) implicitly represent different approaches by which the English language has been acquired. The Inner Circle indicates English as a Native Language (ENL) with fully competent speakers; the Outer Circle implies English as a Second Language (ESL) with competent speakers; and the Expanding Circle implies English as a Foreign Language (EFL) with limited English language speakers (Bolton, 2004, p. 374).

According to Carter and Nunan (2002, pp. 1-6), EFL is used in contexts where English is neither widely used for communication nor used as the medium of instruction. EFL learners have few immediate opportunities to use the language within the environment or the real world. In EFL contexts, the need for proficient nonnative teachers is prominent. This relates directly to, among other factors, *teacher education* that plays the major role in driving the entire body of an education system towards the assigned goals. Teacher education is offered to enhance the competence and performance of teachers through teacher training in the form of degree work and teacher development programs in the form of courses or workshops. Loughran (2006, p. 2) mentions that in-service or continuing education for language teachers includes training modules focusing on the use of new techniques, materials, or equipment as well as upgrading individual classroom skills or areas of knowledge. In some cases, in-service workshops might be intended not only to upgrade and to expand teaching capabilities but to direct teachers to cope with changing conditions in the society that affect the priorities and objectives of the school, and subsequently, bring changes in language programs. Dillon and Maguire (2001) believe that in-service programs clearly have some potential for effective teachers as they enhance their competency levels relevant to, "knowledge and understanding of subject matter, planning, teaching and classroom management, monitoring, novice techniques,

assessment recording, reporting, and accountability as well as other professional requirements” (p. 69).

Needless to say, most, if not all, EFL teachers have little or no exposure to teaching in an English context. They are the product of whatever teacher training or teacher development programs are available in their local countries. These teachers also have a great impact on their EFL learners who receive their instructions. Therefore, teacher education in EFL settings should provide appropriate materials, syllabus, and pedagogy for teachers who are usually nonnative speakers of English and “extensive recycling of key target-language items” (Carter & Nunan, 2002, p. 2) for students who have limited exposure to the language outside the classroom and have limited opportunity to use the language.

2. Background to the study

In Iran, teacher education significance is traced back to the time when the Government established the first institution of higher education, Dar-al-Fonun in 1851, after sending the first party of Iranian students to European universities. According to Safi (1992, p. 27), before the establishment of the first teacher education centers, Dar-al-Moalemin and Dar-al-Moalemat in 1918, teachers in Maktab (i.e., a primitive form of school) did not receive any education and were usually selected from the best and the most studious students. In 1928, those centers changed to Dar-al-Moalemin Aali (i.e., Higher Teacher Centers), and in 1974, it was renamed as Teacher Training University (Alagheband, 1995; Safi, 2001). In the 1970s, due to the rapid growth of population as well as the segregation of schools, new teacher training centers with new syllabuses came into existence (Menashri, 1992, p. 108).

Narafshan (2006) defines short-term in-service development programs for EFL teachers in the context of Iran as continuing education that includes training courses, emphasizing new theoretical approaches towards the issues relevant to the classroom practice, presenting new materials, introducing new techniques and follow-up activities, improving classroom skills, and pursuing question-and-answer routines derived from the teachers’ experience.

Fathivajargah (1997, p. 40) points out that in-service EFL teacher education programs in Iran, starting in 1930s, received the first systematic programs in 1977. The programs were organized locally, and each city could design and manage its own in-service education courses. Then, due to the Islamic Revolution in 1979, the textbooks and the educational system

underwent a radical change; therefore, there was an urgent need for renewing the in-service teacher development programs, too.

Atai and Khaki (2006) mention that some objectives of the in-service EFL teacher education, based on the documents of the Iranian Ministry of Education (1999, 2000), are to enable teachers to teach reading comprehension, listening comprehension, grammatical structure, and new words practically, and to help them learn how to evaluate oral and written examinations.

Mirhassani and Beh-Afarin (2004) conclude that the teachers are, in general, dissatisfied with the present situation of teacher education, and that a gap has been found between what the teachers expect from the current practice of teacher education and what is actually taking place. Atai and Khaki (2006) indicate different perceptions among EFL teachers towards the short-term in-service development programs and present the percentage scale of negative attitudes of TEFL and non-TEFL teachers. Ahmadi (2007) indicates lack of commitment to a clearly defined policy for ELT and find requirements for changes in the educational management existing over schools.

As pointed out by Wellington (2006, p. 55), in-service development program is defined as the means by which members of a profession maintain, improve, and broaden their knowledge, skills, and develop the personal qualities needed as a professional. In light of this definition, the negative attitude, dissatisfaction, and lack of commitment among Iranian EFL teachers, as represented in the abovementioned studies, are serious problems.

The significance of this study is to provide a better picture of the relationship between the programs and the teaching practice of EFL teachers, and to find out possible reason(s) for dissatisfaction, negative attitudes, and lack of commitment among EFL teachers in Iran. In addition, knowing the results of the in-service programs may help teacher educators and trainers evaluate the outcomes of their attempts and take suitable action for possible alternatives for the subsequent programs. School administrators will also have an objective picture of the results for possible feedback on the programs according to their list of criteria for better school development. Moreover, this study may provide a straightforward perspective on the effect of the short-term in-service programs for the education policy makers. In case of shortcomings of the programs, they make considerable modifications to the programs.

In line with the aforementioned objectives, the followings are the research questions pursued in the present study:

1. Is there a significant relationship between the content components of short-term in-service teacher development programs held for EFL teachers of high schools and EFL teachers' utilization approach in the classroom?
2. Is there a significant relationship between EFL teachers' perception towards the short-term in-service teacher development programs held for EFL teachers of high schools and EFL teachers' utilization approach in the classroom?

3. Methodology

3.1 Participants

According to the records of the Education Board in Isfahan (Isfahan Portal, 2008), 1432 English teachers serve in 234 state high schools across the city of Isfahan. The teachers all hold either a BA or an MA degree in English and teach the English language at Isfahan high schools. The sample size out of the high school teachers in Isfahan who participated in this study was 312: They were 138 males, 174 females, 276 BA holders, and 36 MA holders. They were categorized in three age groups (i.e., 25-35, 36-45, and above 45) and three experienced groups (1-10, 11-20, and above 20). Moreover, all the participants had attended short-term in-service EFL teacher development programs. From among them, 46 class observations were carried out.

3.2 Instruments

Guided by the consideration of survey methodology, a three-fold questionnaire was developed from the studies conducted by Abdullah (1999) and Zain (1999), and an observation checklist was adopted from Brown (2001) and Toch and Rothman (2008) because they were considered to be valuable complementary methods to collect data on Iranian EFL teachers' perceptions (TPs) and the teaching approach (TA) to components in English classes. The personal background of English teachers was measured by five variables, namely gender, age, academic qualification, teaching experience, and state of participation in short-term in-service teacher development programs. The EFL TPs towards content components (CCs) of the programs were measured by 40 items in a two-fold questionnaire that the respondents gave their feedback on five-point Likert scales with the available options being: "*Strongly Agree*," "*Agree*," "*Undecided*," "*Disagree*," and "*Strongly*

Disagree.” A 20-item observation checklist was applied in the classes to see whether the teachers utilized the components of the programs. The first 10 items had a focus on the CCs of the short-term in-service programs, and the second 10 items were related to the teachers’ class practice based on their perception towards the very programs. The researchers ticked one of the two options (i.e., Observed/Not-Observed): “Observed” for any aspect of the teaching practice which was present, and “Not-Observed” for any aspect of the teaching practice which was absent in the classroom context.

To validate the questionnaires and the observation checklist, they were delivered to three experts holding Ph.D. degrees in TEFL to rate the items and their relevance to the topic of the study. To find out if the instruments were reliable, 30 EFL teachers were asked to fill the questionnaires and nine classes were observed. The data were analyzed through Cronbach’s alpha using the SPSS software. The result showed that reliability was acceptable ($\alpha = 0.78$).

3.3 Procedures

Data collection was administered in April and May, 2009. Out of 312 questionnaire sheets, 140 were filled out by the male and 172 by the female teachers throughout six educational districts in Isfahan. For the second phase of the study, the researchers attended 46 high school EFL classes in six educational districts of Isfahan in May 2009 and observed 25 male classes conducted by male teachers and 21 female classes conducted by female teachers. While observing the classes, the researchers ticked a 20-item checklist either “Observed” or “Not-Observed.”

To obtain the personal profiles of the participants, a questionnaire with five questions eliciting information on their gender, age, academic qualification, English teaching experience, and participation status in the programs was used. A 20-item questionnaire using the Likert scale covering seven teaching areas related to English teaching in Isfahan high schools was employed. Another 20-item questionnaire was used to get the EFL TPs towards the short-term in-service programs. This questionnaire meant to find out the participants’ abilities to apply instruction in real classroom contexts. A 20-item observation checklist was also applied in order to see if the teachers practiced what they had claimed to do in the questionnaires. The first 10 items of the observation checklist reflected the CCs of the programs, and the second 10 items reflected the TPs towards the programs.

4. Data analysis

The collected data were fed into SPSS software to be analyzed considering the scales of measurement of the variables of this study. The data analysis was first followed to examine the reliability of the instrument, and Cronbach's alpha values were obtained to compare the pilot study and actual data reliabilities. The results indicated that it was highly reliable ($\alpha = 0.90$). In order to see the normal distribution of the data, a histogram was employed, indicating that the data were normally distributed. Descriptive statistics were, then, used to analyze the mean, standard deviation, frequency distribution, and percentage for the participants as to their gender, age, teaching experience, and academic qualification of the programs. Inferential statistics were also used to show the relationships between the independent and the dependent variables.

The data were subjected to statistical analyses, and the total scores of each respondent to every single variable were obtained. The total scores were changed into average to facilitate the statistical analyses. The average case converted the scales from ordinal and nominal to interval and continuous or parametric data. Having been interval and parametric, the data were, then, analyzed through *t* test, ANOVA, and Pearson product-moment correlation.

4.1 Results for the CCs of the programs

The *t*-test results for the equality of means between the males and the females in their responses showed that the *p* value was higher than the alpha level of .05 ($p = .62$), and so there was no significant difference between the males and the females in their responses about the CCs of the programs ($t = -.48$; $df = 310$; $sig. = .62$).

The *t* test was manipulated to see if there was any difference between BA and MA responses, and the results showed that since *p* value was lower than the alpha level of .05 ($p = .007$), there was a significant difference between BA and MA responses about the CCs of the programs ($t = -2.73$; $df = 310$; $sig. = .007$).

The ANOVA result showed that Sig-F .000 was lower than the alpha level of .05, alluding to a significant difference in responses about the CCs of the programs among the three age groups. To identify the pair groups' significant difference, multiple comparisons were used, and the differences of the groups are shown by asterisks in Table 1:

Table 1. *Multiple comparisons for the participants' age*

| (I) Age | (J) Age | Std. Error | Sig. |
|---------|----------|------------|------|
| 25-35 | 36-45 | .068 | .000 |
| 25-35 | Above 45 | .059 | .000 |
| 36-45 | Above 45 | .056 | .001 |

The ANOVA finding indicated that Sig-F .000 is lower than the alpha level of .05. Thus, there was a significant difference in responses about the CCs of the programs among the experienced groups. To identify the pair groups' significant difference, multiple comparisons were used, and the differences of the groups are shown by asterisks in Table 2:

Table 2. *Multiple comparisons for the participants' experience*

| (I) Experience | (J) Experience | M (I-J) | Std. Error | Sig. |
|----------------|----------------|---------|------------|------|
| 1-10 | 11-20 | -.44(*) | .070 | .000 |
| 1-10 | Above 20 | -.64(*) | .061 | .000 |
| 11-20 | Above 20 | -.20(*) | .057 | .001 |

4.2 Results for the TPs of the programs

The *t*-test results for the equality of means between the males and the females in their responses show that the *p* value .22 was higher than the alpha level of .05, and so no significant difference was observed between the males and the females in their responses about the TPs to the programs ($t = 1.22$; $df = 310$; $sig. = .22$).

The *t* test was manipulated to see if there was any difference between BA and MA responses, and the result manifested that since the *p* value .000 was lower than the alpha level of .05, there was a significant difference between BA and MA responses about the TPs to the programs ($t = -4.00$; $df = 310$; $sig. = .000$).

The ANOVA result showed that Sig-F .000 was lower than the alpha level of .05, indicating a significant difference in responses about the TPs towards the programs among the three age groups at the .05 level of significance. To identify the pair groups' significant difference, multiple comparisons were used, and the differences of the groups are shown by asterisks in Table 3:

Table 3. *Multiple comparisons for the participants' age*

| (I) Age | (J) Age | M (I-J) | Std. Error | Sig. |
|---------|----------|---------|------------|------|
| 25-35 | 36-45 | -.57(*) | .066 | .000 |
| 25-35 | Above 45 | -.78(*) | .057 | .000 |
| 36-45 | Above 45 | -.20(*) | .055 | .001 |

A further ANOVA indicated a significant difference in responses about the TPs towards the programs among the experienced groups (Sig-F .000 < .05). To identify the pair groups' significant difference, multiple comparisons were used and the differences of the groups are shown by asterisks in Table 4:

Table 4. *Multiple comparisons for the participants' experience*

| (I) Experience | (J) Experience | M (I-J) | Std. Error | Sig. |
|----------------|----------------|---------|------------|------|
| 1-10 | 11-20 | -.53(*) | .068 | .000 |
| 1-10 | Above 20 | -.76(*) | .059 | .000 |
| 11-20 | Above 20 | -.23(*) | .056 | .000 |

4.3 Results for the relationship between the CCs, TPs, and TA

In order to see whether English teachers in Isfahan high schools would utilize the CCs of the programs identified in the questionnaires, the first 10 items of the observation checklist were dedicated to the CCs of the programs to reflect the teachers' TA in the classroom (TA1). In order to see whether English teachers in Isfahan high schools would utilize what was perceived, the second 10 items of the observation checklist were devoted to the TPs to reflect the teachers' TA in the classroom (TA2).

In order to check any correlation between CC and TA1, the total scores obtained from CCs of the programs were compared with the total scores of TA (TA1), and they were statistically analyzed using the Pearson product-moment correlation. The results disclosed that there was no significant relationship between CC and TA1 at .05 level of significance ($r = .047$; $N = 46$; $\alpha = .05$; sig. = .756).

In order to see if there was any correlation between TPs and TA2, the total scores obtained from TPs towards the programs were compared with the total scores of TA (TA2), and they were statistically analyzed using the Pearson product-moment correlation. The results revealed no significant relationship between TPs and TA2 at .05 level of significance ($r = .096$; $N = 46$; $\alpha = .05$; $\text{sig.} = .525$).

5. Discussion and conclusion

Based on the results of the study, there was no significant difference in the CCs of the short-term in-service programs between the male and the female teachers. That is, both the males and the females showed negative attitudes towards the CCs of such programs, whereas there was a significant difference in the CCs of the programs between the teachers holding BA degrees and those holding MA degrees. The BA holders manifested moderate attitudes towards the CCs of such-programs, whereas MA holders indicated negative attitudes towards them. However, there was a significant difference towards the CCs of the programs among the three age groups: The first group, aged 25-35, showed positive attitudes towards the CCs of the programs, while the other groups—36-45 and above 45—showed negative attitudes. Also, there was a significant difference towards the CCs among the three groups of teachers: The first group with the least teaching experience (i.e., 1-10) showed positive attitudes towards the CCs of the programs, whereas the other groups (i.e., 11-20 and above 20) showed negative attitudes.

The above findings could be explained by the nature of the distribution of the CCs of such programs that seem unproductive and ineffective for more experienced English teachers directed to the participants' expectations of the applications of the CCs of the programs in the real classroom context. It seems that high school teachers who are more experienced in teaching English versus less experienced teachers do not meet their expectations of the applications of the CCs in the classroom. The findings of this part of the study are consistent with those of Atai and Khaki (2006), who claim that more experienced teachers have different needs from the novice and less experienced teachers, and so they want something more than just what to teach like how and why to teach.

Also, the results indicated that there was no significant difference towards the programs in general between the male and the female teachers. That is, both the males and the females showed positive attitudes towards the programs, but there was a significant difference towards the programs

between the BA and MA holders. The BA holders showed positive attitudes towards the programs, while the MA holders indicated negative attitudes. There was a significant difference towards the programs among the three age groups, though the groups showed positive attitudes: The first group, aged 25-35, showed better attitudes towards the programs than the other two groups, aged 36-45 and above 45. Although the teachers with different experience and backgrounds indicated positive attitude towards the programs, there was a significant difference among them. The least experienced teachers manifested better attitude towards the programs, and the most experienced teachers signaled the least positive attitudes.

The above findings could be explained by the focus of the programs on mere theories leading to the least attention to class practice. In spite of the serious shortcomings, theories in the programs are taken for granted too soon instead of being subjected to careful conceptual and empirical appraisals. The relationship between theory and practice is one-sided, and it is the theorist who is the final judge in the classes, while it should be the practitioner. The findings could also be explained by the textbooks syllabuses oriented to the Communicative Approach. High school textbooks in Iran seem to be prepared to build up communicative potentiality between students-students and students-teachers. Nonetheless, it is not clear to what extent a particular method is congruent with the actual needs of the learners. Each part of the textbooks needs a particular relevant method in a practical way that is not in the line with the Communicative Language Teaching (CLT). The findings of this part of the study are consistent with the findings of Ahmadi (2002), whose study shows that textbooks sections are thought to meet up what theories utter rather than what suits students' needs.

Overall, there is no significant relationship: 1) between the CCs of the short-term in-service programs and the TA of English teachers in the classroom, and 2) between English TPs and their TA in the classroom. This could be explained by the focus of the programs which is basically on theories and when it comes to practice, it usually deals with teachers' control and class administration, not their ability and skills in language teaching. The findings of this part of the study are consistent with the findings of the study conducted by Mirhassani and Beh-Afarin (2004), who insist on the lack of dialogue between theory and practice in the classroom. That is, the in-service programs concentrate on "ways-to-administer" the classroom rather than "ways-to- practice" the skills in the classroom.

As enhancing a better understanding of common goals of the programs can guarantee teacher development, the programs should become research-

oriented, encouraging EFL teachers to work out their own solutions to the problems they meet. In other words, education policy makers should pay close attention to teachers' critical enquiry as an essential component of every program. Education policy-makers should take account of the practical aspects of teaching and learning theories and facilitate the channel of communication between theory and practice. Teacher educators can also take strategies from teachers' experiences, including issues of teaching different skills, teaching for different purposes, and approaches towards different materials. These strategies can help teachers not to stick to mere theory and to find the programs more meaningful. Needs identification by EFL teachers can assist teachers, students, and schools and draw the attention to weak points for further change and improvement. In this way, teachers express their commitment, enthusiasm, intellectual and emotional energy in the work, and seek for authorities to notice their reflection. EFL teachers should assist teacher development programs in regular evaluation and offer suggestion for any possible adjustment or change. Teachers should also provide any professional assistance for promotion of the programs, since the ideal testing ground for appraisal and evaluation of theories and models presented in the programs is the language classroom and the ideal professionals for evaluation are teachers themselves.

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