

English Language Teachers' Views on Self-initiated Professional Development

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Abstract

Keeping pace with the continuous changes and innovations in the field of English language teaching is considered to be a necessity for the quality of teachers' teaching. There are numerous approaches to teacher development, among which self-initiated development stands as one of the noticeable trends. Although teacher development is crucial for the quality of education, it appears that there are not many studies on self-development of English language teachers in Iran. There are studies mostly concentrating on the evaluation of pre- or in-service programs in English language teaching. Addressing this call, the main purpose of this study was to investigate perceptions of 48 in-service English language teachers towards their professional development. The data collection instrument used was a researcher-made questionnaire consisting of both open-ended and close-ended items. Employing descriptive statistics, the data was analyzed. The results indicated that the teachers agreed with most of the concepts that indicate the importance of professional development. Moreover, they were aware of the importance of major professional development activities for their development. Yet, peer observation and action research were not preferred as much as the other activities.

Keywords: Foreign Language Teaching, English Language Teachers, Teacher Education, Professional Development, Self-initiated Professional Development

Introduction

In recent years, in developing countries like Iran, one of the most significant issues in the field of English Language Teaching (EFL) has been the professional development of English as a Foreign Language Teachers (EFLT) and professional development has become a vital component in teachers' lives. According to Day and Sachs (2004) teacher's professional development refers to all the activities that a teacher performs to improve his/her performances in his/her work. Such activities are designed to ensure persistent teacher development. This process would help teachers towards expertise (Kelly, 2006).

Teacher professional development is a cycle that never ends at any point. Teacher professional development starts in pre-service teaching program and it continues up to the time that teacher stays in the profession. As teaching is a public career, a teacher is the focus of consideration and the society expects a teacher to develop and improve students' learning. This is possible by empowering teachers to renew, adapt and apply their information (Lange, 1990).

On the other hand, no matter how good pre-service training for teachers is, it cannot be expected to prepare teachers for all the challenges they will face throughout their careers. Thus, teachers need to seek opportunities to maintain a high standard of teaching. Moreover, the nature of teaching itself demands that teachers engage in career-long professional growth (Day, 1999) because as Tom (1997) states, teaching expertise does mature over the span of a profession. Therefore, one of the main tasks of teachers is to give importance to their own development and continue learning through making use of the opportunities they have. Furthermore, there are rapid developments and innovations in this field that as Pachier and Field (1997) put forward being an effective foreign language teacher demands a commitment to keep up with the developments in the field and a willingness to involve in constant professional development.

Besides, Current research shows a strong correlation between teachers' teaching and students' school success (Darling Hammond, 2000; Sparks, 2002; Diaz-Maggioli, 2004; Nargesy, 2012; Ejima, 2012; Asadi, & Motalebzadeh, 2013; Sabzian, Ismail, Ismail, & Vajargah, 2013).

Furthermore, it has been recognized that teachers, apart from the methods and materials they may use, are central to improving English language teaching (Prabhu, 1990; Richards & Nunan, 1990; Freeman, 1991; Johnson, 1992; Freeman, 2002). Freeman and Johnson (1998) stated that the focus of language teacher education must be on the activity of the teaching itself, the teacher who does it, the context in which it is done, and the pedagogy by which it is done. Some studies suggest that learners will not achieve their learning goals successfully until they are given regular and systematic instruction. They also propose that teachers can improve their teaching strategies by taking part in more professional development activities in order to help students to reach their learning goals.

Since teachers' role is actually important in changes to teaching methodology and leads to improvements in quality of education, especially EFL teachers who have to meet the needs and standards of English as an international language, several research and development efforts have been driven over the years to define and improve the quality of teaching (Hargreaves & Fullan, 1994). Many educators (Freeman, 2000 & Nunan, 2003) have called for improvement and changes in EFL teacher education in order to increase the quality of teaching and learning. So it is important that for the best students' outcomes, teachers need to take on in continuous professional development (Vo & Nguyen, 2010). Though, relatively little has been studied in EFL teacher education, even less among Iranian teachers of English teaching.

Recently, EFL teachers' professional development has received a shift from institutionalized based practices to individual driven activities and more responsibility has been given to the teachers themselves with the assumption that teachers are able to identify their needs (Simegn, 2014). They need to develop professionally as English language teachers necessitates engaging in the learning process actively and there are numerous development activities for English language teachers to engage in for the purpose of self-development. Additionally, there are a number of dimensions in which these professional development activities may vary along. For instance, according to Loucks-Horsley et al. (1987) one of them is short-term or long-term dimension of a teacher's improvement activities.

Among these various approaches to teacher development, self-initiated development stands as one of the noticeable trends. On the word of Wajnryb (1992), teacher development is something that occurs within the classroom and within oneself. It is often initiated by teachers themselves. In other words, self-initiation of professional development is one of the invaluable features of effective professional development since it entails teachers' motivation and devotion to develop, which are considered as the key terms for successful development.

In Guskey's view (2000, p.57), a self-initiated professional development is a "process in which a learner assumes primary responsibility for planning, implementing, and evaluating the learning process where an education agent or resource often plays a facility role in the process."

Though, many researchers (Sparks, 2002; Diaz-Maggioli, 2004; Ejima, 2012; Asadi, & Motalebzadeh, 2013) claim the benefit of engaging teachers in self-initiated professional development, relatively little study has been conducted in EFL teacher education, even less among Iranian teachers of English teaching. Therefore, this study aims to analyze Iranian English language teachers' attitudes towards and perceptions of their own development and self-initiated professional development. This study has attempted to address the following research questions:

1. What are English language teachers' attitudes toward their own professional development?
2. What major professional development activities do English language teachers recognize as critical to their progress as professionals and to what extent do they utilize these opportunities?
3. What hinders change and development in English language teachers?

Method

Participants

In this study the perceptions of self-initiated professional development of 48 English language teachers of Golestan province were investigated. Participants consisted of teachers of diverse age (from 22 to 49), the average age was 32, different degrees (the majority of respondents held a bachelor degree) and varying duration of teaching experience (from 4 to 28 years).

Totally, 56.25% of these teachers were female and the rest were male. These teachers were teaching English in different educational settings such as high schools, institutions, and universities.

Instrumentation

This study employed a questionnaire designed by the researcher to collect data on English language teachers' perceptions towards their professional development. The questionnaire included both close ended and open-ended statements to reach a wider understanding of the subject. In the questionnaire, these statements were presented in the form of items for teachers to comment on a five point Likert-type scale ranging from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree." In addition to that, in the third part of the questionnaire, a range of professional development activities were selected from the literature, and they were presented on a five point Likert-type scale ranging from "never" to "always" to find out how often teachers use these activities.

The questionnaire was composed of four sections and the questions addressed to three research questions. The questions in section 1 were designed to find out the group characteristics of the participants. The second section in the questionnaire included questions about the attitudes of teachers towards their own professional development. In the third section, teachers were asked about professional development activities to find out how much they give importance to these activities and to what degree they make use of these opportunities. The items in the last section of the questionnaire aimed to uncover some of the constraints on teacher development.

Procedure

The data for the study were gathered from English language teachers of Golestan Province at different educational settings. The questionnaires were distributed to the teachers during the meetings that were held during the educational year. Teachers filled in the questionnaires during these meetings. Furthermore, some questionnaires were e-mailed to some teachers. At the beginning of the questionnaire the purpose of the study and different parts of the questionnaire which participants were to fill in were

explained. A total of 70 questionnaires were distributed. However, 48 questionnaires were received.

The data collected through the questionnaire were analyzed descriptively to understand their general trends.

Results

As Figure 1 shows, the teachers who responded to the questionnaire were mainly female (56.25%). Most of the teachers were between 36-45 years old (75%). Teachers who had 10 –20 years of teaching experience form the largest group of respondents (45.84%). Just 10.42% of the teachers had more than 25 years of teaching experience. The majority of the respondents were ELT graduates (64.58%). 29.17% of the teachers were English Language and Literature graduates. Most of the teachers who responded to the questionnaire were not enrolled in a degree program (72.92%) and had a BA as their last degree (75%). Most of the teachers (71.4%) didn't have any plans to take additional qualifications in ELT or education.

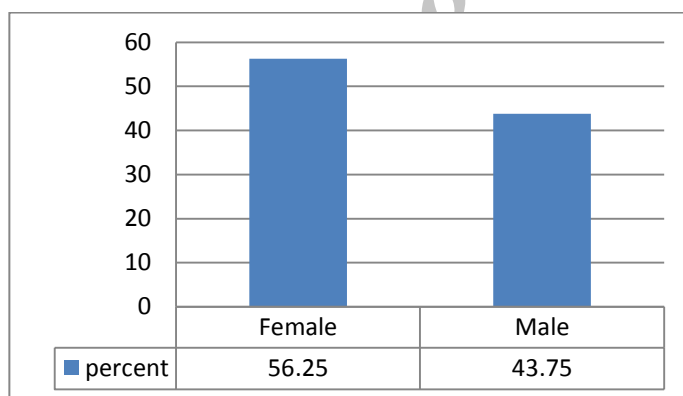


Figure1. Participants' gender

Teachers' responses to the statements in the second section of the questionnaire provided data on teachers' attitudes towards their own professional development. The first statement in the second section of the questionnaire asked teachers to express their views about the dependence of school teachers on improving their professional knowledge. The results are presented in Figure 2.

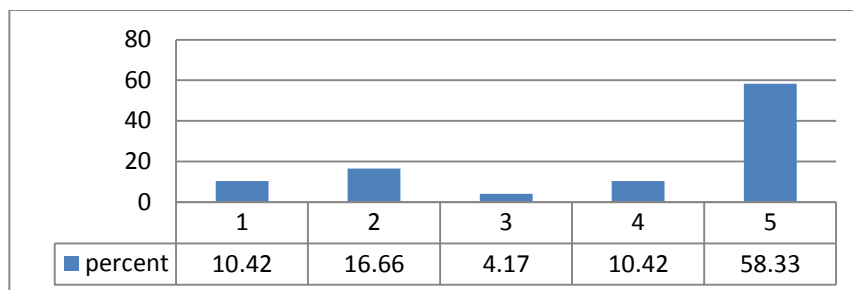


Figure2. Teachers' views on the dependence of teachers on the schools

As can be seen from this table, for most participants the majority of the answers were on the 'agree' side. Most of the participants agreed that teachers should improve their professional skills and knowledge without too much dependence on the school they work.

Concerning the second and the fourth statements that asked teachers' views on taking the initiative for their own professional development and their involvement in their own evaluation, the respondents largely agreed that teachers should take actions (Figure3).

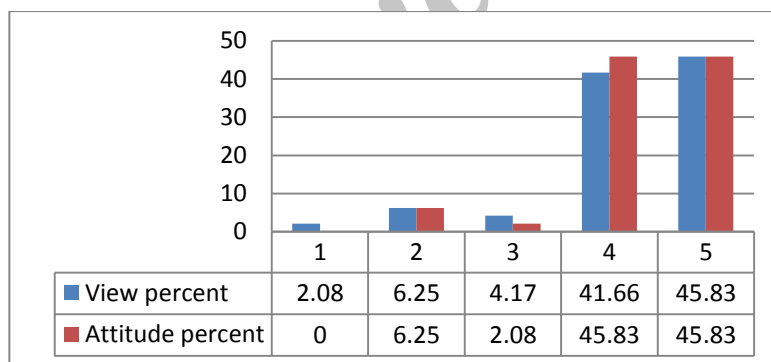


Figure3. Teachers' views on taking the initiative and their attitudes on involvement in their own professional development

Regarding the third statement that investigated teachers' attitudes on freedom of teachers in testing new ideas, most of the teachers agreed this statement (Figure^۴).

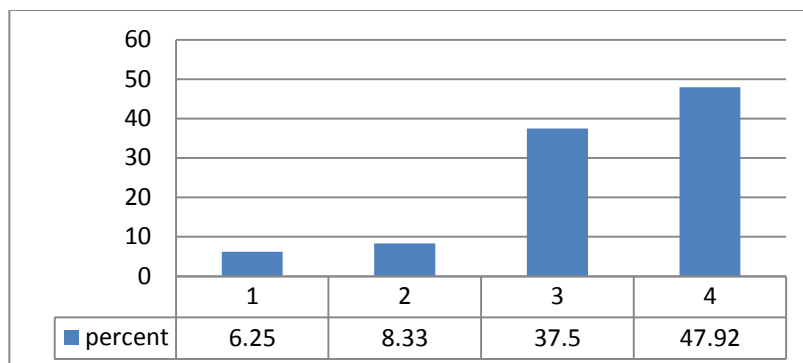


Figure 4. Teachers' attitudes on their freedom in testing new ideas.

In statement 5, teachers were asked to give their opinions on helping each other in identifying their strengths and weaknesses. As Figure 5 Shows, just 8.34 % of participants disagreed with this statement. Furthermore, as this Figure demonstrates, most of the teachers believed that teachers should help each other in solving problems.

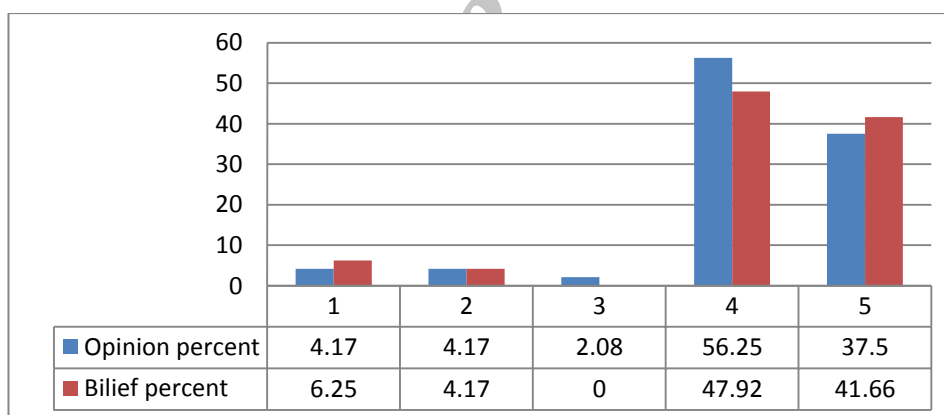


Figure5. Teachers' opinions and beliefs on helping each other in evaluating their teaching and producing solutions

Regarding statement 7, over 76% of respondents agreed that willingness is an important factor in successful professional development and about 90% believed that teachers need to be open to new ideas and changes (Figure 6).

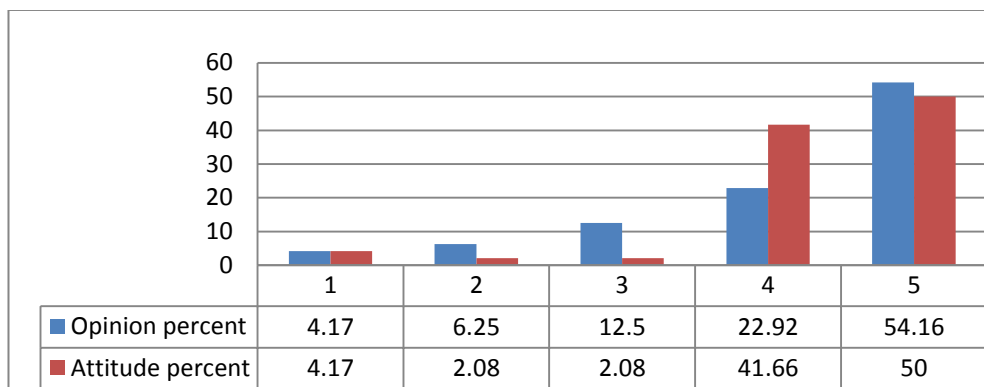


Figure6. Teachers' opinions on willingness and their attitudes on openness to new ideas

Concerning statements 9, 10 and 11, about 89% of the respondents agreed that teachers require reflecting on their own practices. Over 66% of respondents agreed that peer observation should be used to gather information and most of the respondents agreed that keeping themselves up to date with the innovations in ELT is necessary (Figure7).

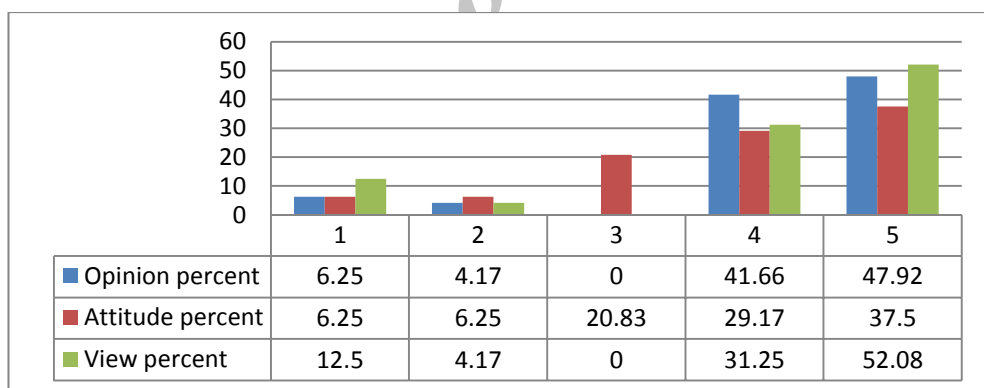


Figure7. Teachers' opinions on reflecting on their own practices, their attitudes on employing peer observation and their views on keeping themselves up to date

The second purpose of this study is to explore English language teachers' perceptions of major professional development activities and to what degree they make use of these activities (research question number 2). Teachers' responses to the statements in the third section of the questionnaire provide data on what major professional development activities they perceive as critical to their development as professionals and to what degree they make

use of these activities. First of all, teachers were asked to rate the given professional development activities to collect data on how important they perceive these activities for development, then teachers were asked to respond how often they make use of them.

As Figures 8, 9, 10 and 11 display, when asked to respond to the first four items, which underlie the theme of collaboration, the majority of respondents agreed that the collaborative activities are very important/important. “Asking for help for professional help from colleagues” is mostly agreed to be very important/ important (95.8%) (Figure9).

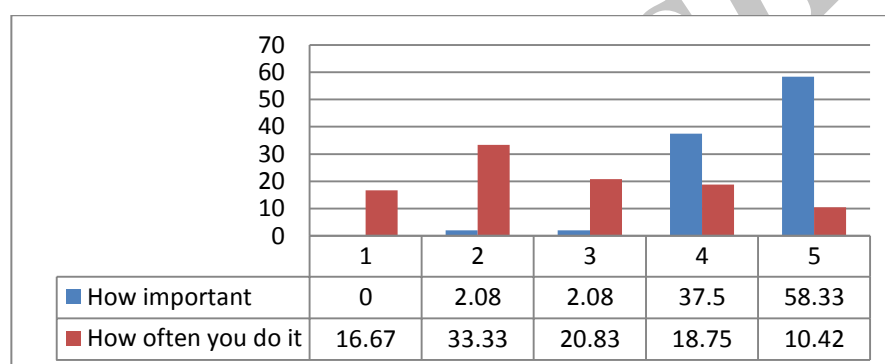


Figure9. Asking for professional help from colleagues

The majority of teachers reported that they find sharing experiences and problems with colleagues also very important/ important (93.7%) (Figure8).

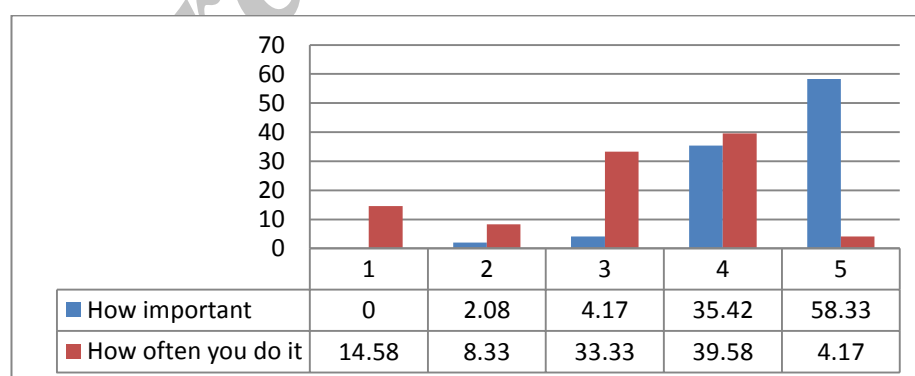


Figure8. Sharing experiences and problems with colleagues

In addition, working on developing new materials with colleagues was agreed to be very important/ important by 89.5% of teachers (Figure10).

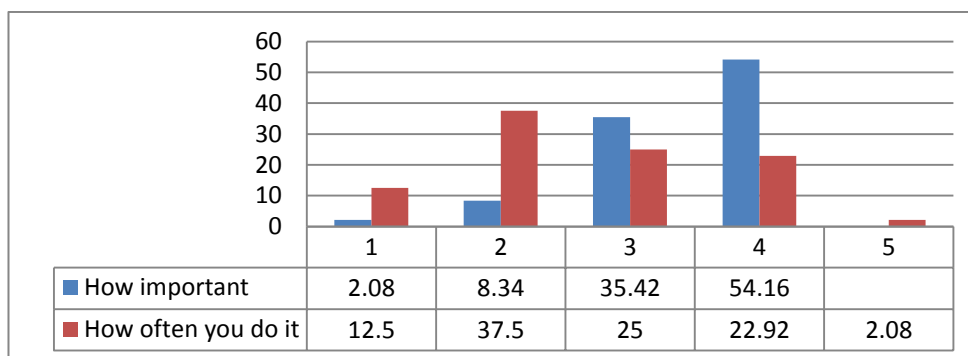


Figure10. Working on developing new materials with colleagues

Similarly, most teachers gave importance to working developing techniques and activities with colleagues (87.4%) (Figure11).

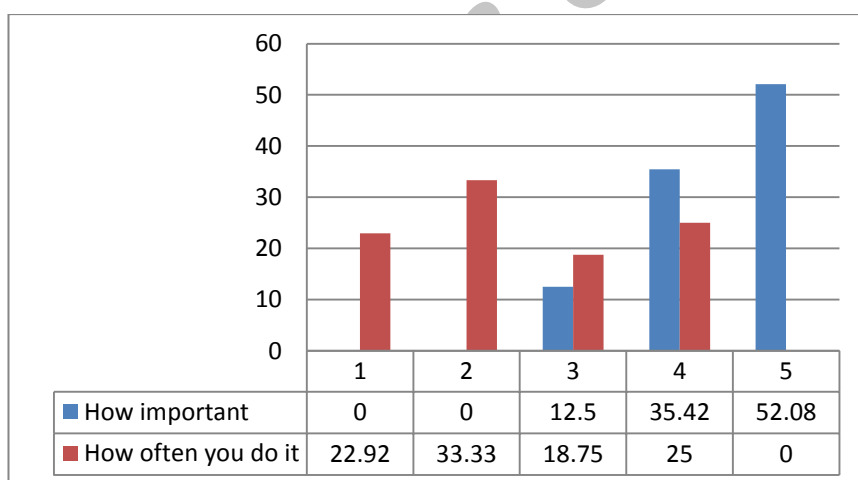


Figure11. Working on developing techniques and activities with colleagues

Interestingly, although teachers agree that all these four collaborative activities are important, the fifth activity, which is peer observation doesn't seem to receive very much attention from some of the teachers. Only 21% of the teachers perceived peer observation as critical to their development,

the rest of the teachers (79%) said peer observation is of no/ little importance or somewhat important (Figure 12).

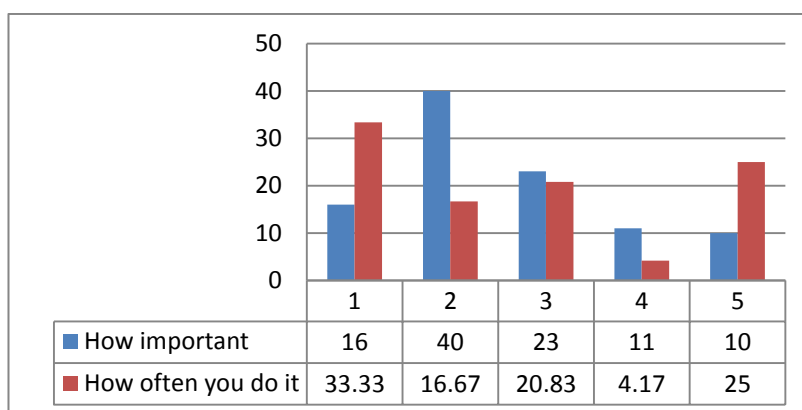


Figure12. Teachers' views on peer observation as a teacher professional development activity

Moreover, while many teachers found trying out new ideas or suggestions in practice (83.3%) (Figure14) and reflection on own teaching (79.1%) very important/ important (Figure15), they didn't find action research as critically important. Just 23 % of the teachers thought it was a very important/ important activity, whereas about 77 % believed it is little/ somewhat important (Figure 13).

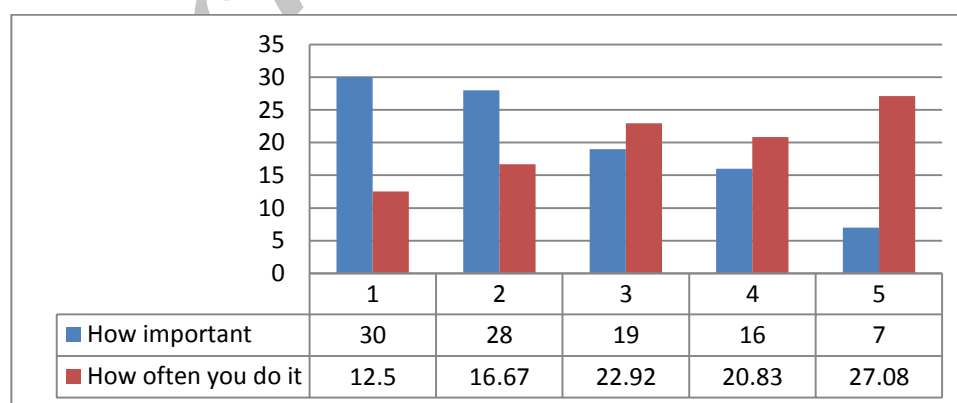


Figure13. Teacher initiated classroom investigation (action research)

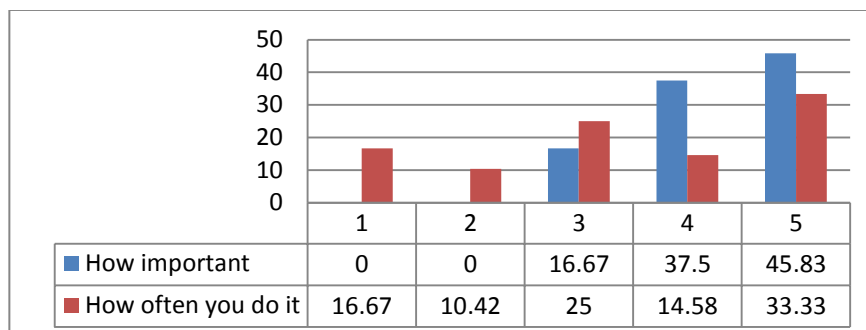


Figure14. Trying out new ideas or suggestions in practice

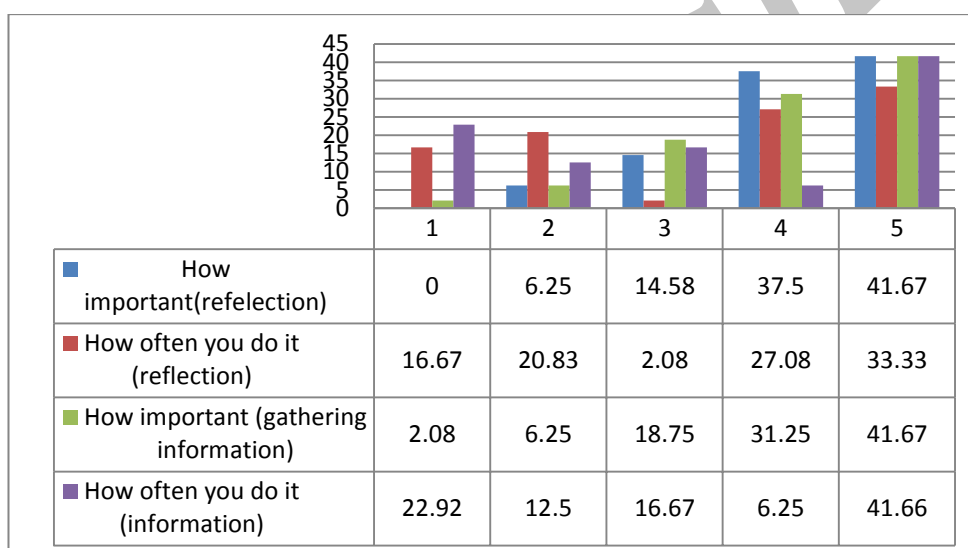


Figure15. Reflection on own teaching and gathering information

At the same time more than half of the teachers (79.1%) believed gathering information about one's own teaching performance was very important/ important (Figure15).

There is no doubt that teachers have many more opportunities to develop professionally. They can make use of outside resources and opportunities. On the issue of whether these opportunities are perceived to be important, most teachers believed that in-service training (workshops, seminars, etc.) are very important/ important (87.5%). Similarly, the majority also reported following professional development programs are very important/ important (87.4%) (Figure16).

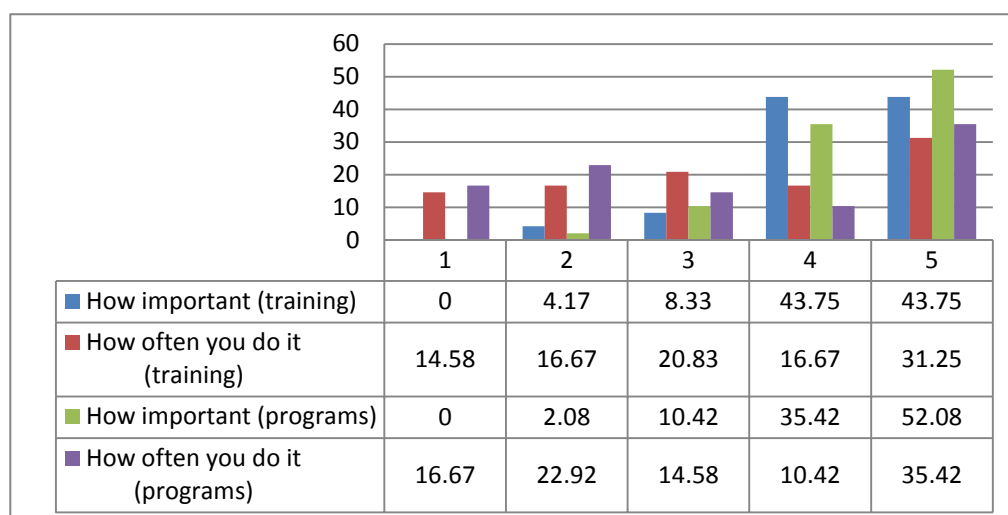


Figure16. In-service training and following professional development programs

As figure 17 indicates, 68.7% of the teachers found following research literature on own field very important/ important, while 31.2% thought it is little/ somewhat important.

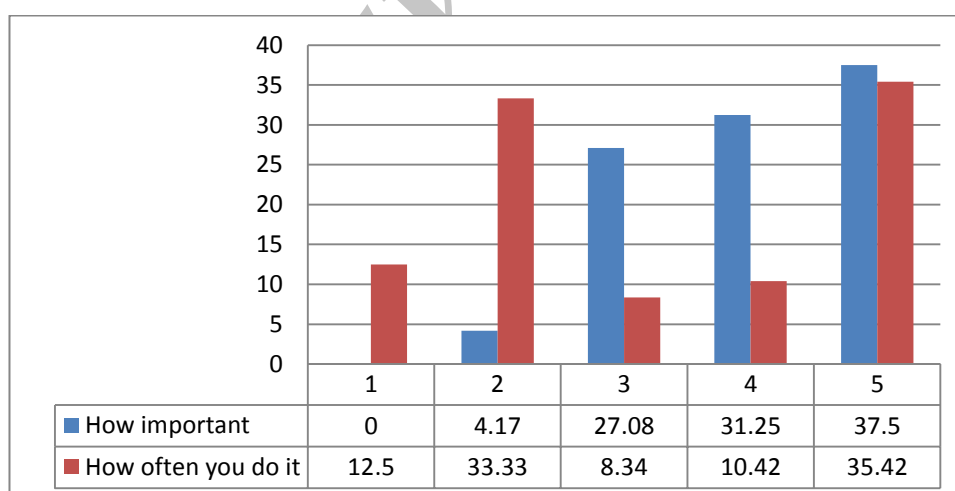


Figure17. Following research literature on own field

In addition to getting help from colleagues for development, teachers may benefit from their superiors as an alternative way of improvement in their skills or knowledge. However, there were some teachers who don't think observation of classroom events by heads or administrators is important. 31.25% of the teachers considered it as somewhat/little important, 2.08 % believe it is not important at all, while 66.6% found it very important/ important (Figure 18).

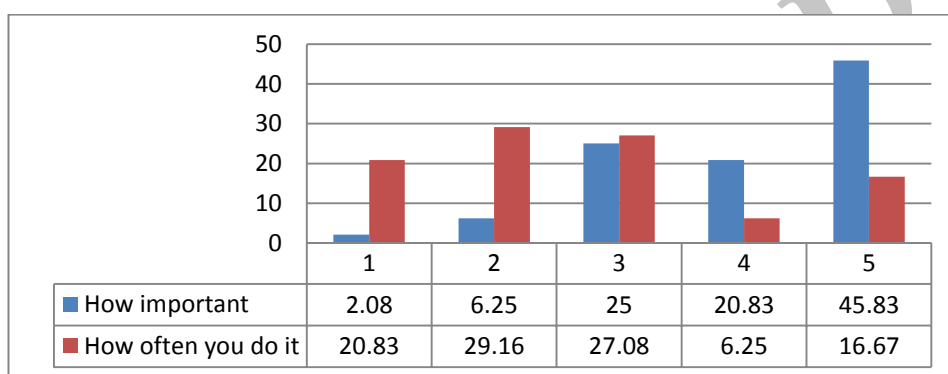


Figure18. Observation of classroom events by heads, administrators

When asked whether training other teachers is important for their professional development, 87.5% responded that it is very important/ important (Figure19).

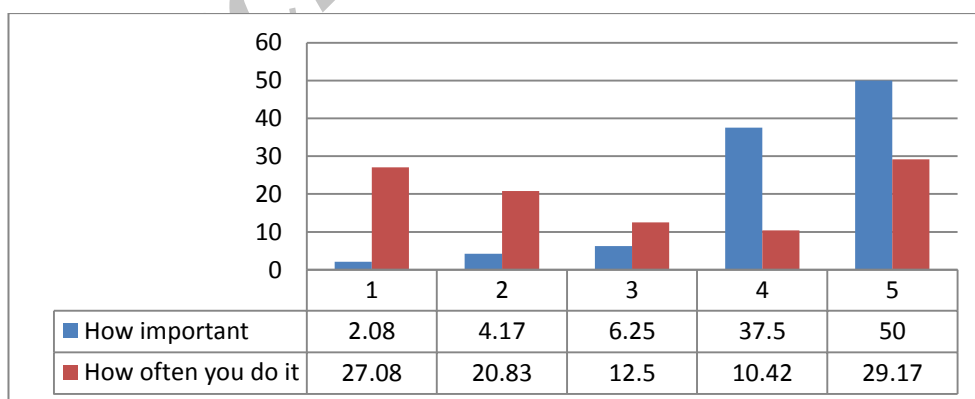


Figure19. Training other teachers

The third purpose of this study was to explore what hinders change and growth in English language teachers (research question number 3).

Teachers' responses to the statements in the fourth section of the questionnaire provided data on how important teachers perceive some factors that hinder change and growth.

As Figure20 reveals, personal financial problems as a drawback in professional development efforts was seen to be very important/ important by the majority of teachers (81.25%). The minority of the teachers found this problem of little importance (4.17%). Excessive workload was received as a more important constraint to their professional development by two third of the teachers (77%). A small number of teachers perceived this problem as of little importance (2%). Furthermore, most of the teachers (68.7%) reported that strict working hour was a very important/ important drawback in their professional development efforts. Nevertheless, there was a small proportion (10.4%) who believe it was somewhat important and even 20.8% considered it little or not important at all.

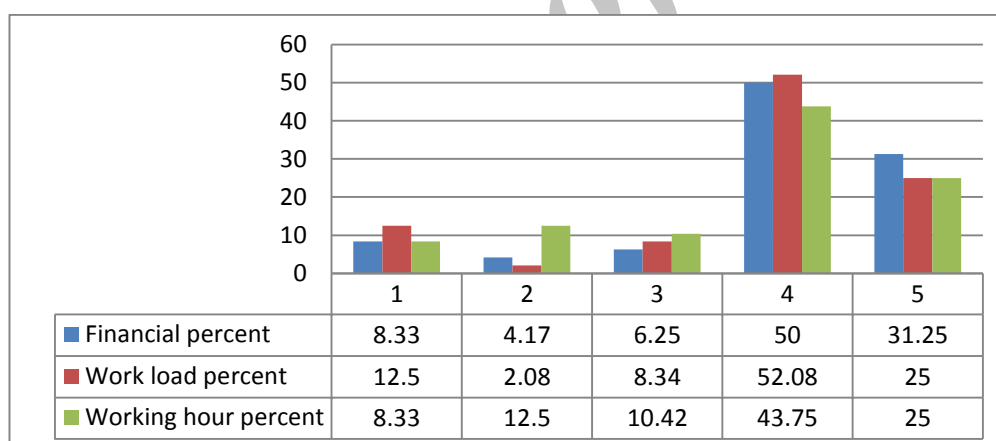


Figure20. Personal financial problems, excessive work load and strict working hours

Lack of communication among colleagues was found to be a very important/ important factor hindering change and growth in teachers by the most of the teachers (87.5%) and the minority believed this was somewhat important (12.5%). Similarly, lack of collaboration was considered to be very important/ important by 79.1% of teachers and 6.25% considered it to be somewhat important. 52% of the teachers found lack of institutional support as a very important/ important hindrance to their growth.

Understandably, lack of self-motivation was considered to be very important/ important by the 56.2 % of the teachers (Figure21).

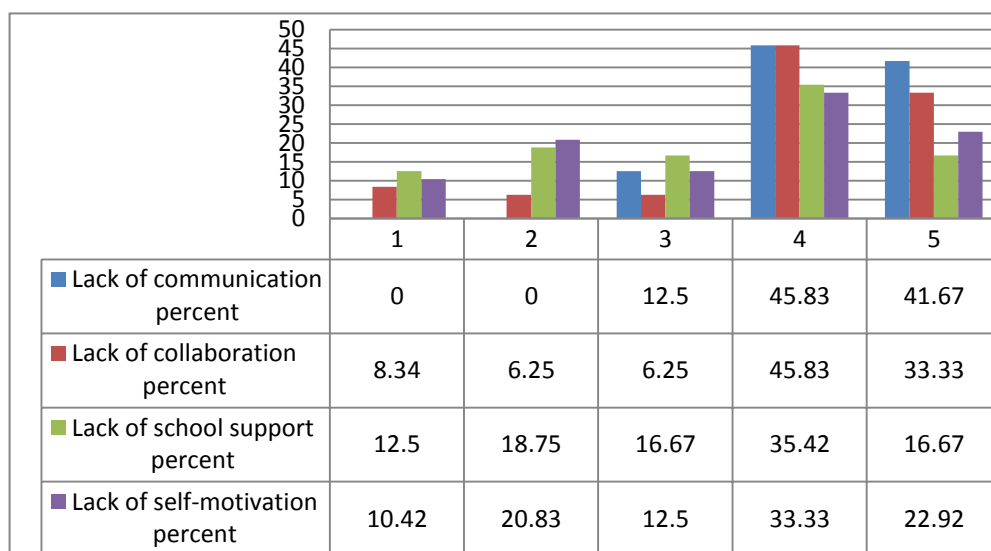


Figure21. Lack of communication and collaboration among colleagues, Lack of school support and Lack of self- motivation

Furthermore, another factor that hinders growth in teachers is educational background. The majority of the teachers found it very important/ important (85.4%) and 4.1% considered it somewhat important. 10.4% perceived it little important and or not important at all.

According to the results, most of the teachers (87.5%) reported difficulty in reaching literature in the field as a very important/ important constraint, while 6.1% believed it was not important at all or of little importance (Figure22).

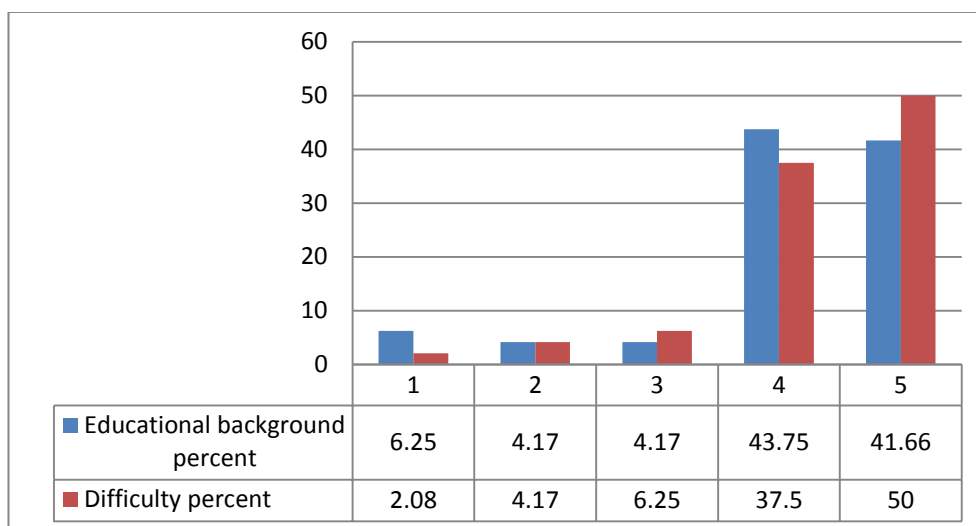


Figure22. Educational background and difficulty in reaching literature in the field

Although these results imply English language teachers' perceptions of the factors that hinder them in their professional development, essentially this issue needs to be studied to find out why this is the case. These results suggested that all the listed factors that hinder change and growth in teachers were perceived to be very important/ important by the teachers with slight differences.

At the end of the questionnaire through an open-ended question teachers were asked to state their opinions and suggestions regarding various aspects of professional development activities and problems faced during professional development. A total of 4 respondents (8.3%) provided their beliefs and ideas on various issues in terms of professional development. One teacher commented on how teachers' attitudes should be in terms of their own professional development. One noted that teachers should be open to criticism. Another comment made is that, teachers should never feel contented with their methods of teaching. These teachers underlined the necessity of life-long learning and the attitude that needs to be adapted when this necessity is taken into consideration. One of the teachers reported that new developments in the field should be informed to the teachers.

Discussion

One of the main purposes of this study was to find out English language teachers' attitudes towards their own professional development. The survey results indicate that almost all the teachers who participated in this study strongly agree or agree with the statements that reflect some of the major ideas about professional development. The majority of teachers are also positive towards the idea of taking the initiative for professional development rather than dependence on the institution they work for and freedom to test new ideas or techniques in practice during development efforts. Other important themes, which are reflection and evaluation of oneself in order to improve teaching skills, are preferred by significantly large proportion of teachers. They give importance to being involved in the evaluation of their teaching and to reflecting upon their practices to improve professionally. Furthermore, the majority of teachers are enthusiastic about collaboration during professional development efforts. As a result, questionnaire data suggest that teachers predominantly agree with the ideas that reflect some of the major and accepted conceptions about professional development. This suggests that teachers accept that they need to show certain attitudes in order to improve professionally.

Concerning major professional activities, most of the teachers consider the major professional development activities as important. As well as that, most of the activities are made use of with varying frequencies. The collaborative activities like sharing experiences, problems with colleagues, asking for professional help from them, and working on developing new materials, techniques and activities with colleagues are received to be important by most of the teachers. However, one of the collaborative activities; peer observation isn't perceived as critical to their development by half of the teachers. There may be a couple of reasons for this reaction towards peer observation. First of all, peer observation may be seen as an activity, which is done to evaluate and therefore, it could provoke negative feelings and reactions among teachers. As Cosh (1999) underlines, teachers may even become defensive and resistant to any future suggestions. Similarly, Richards and Lockhart (1996) underline the fact that in many language programs, teachers are often reluctant to take part in observation or related activities since observation is associated with evaluation. The data

reveal the fact that teachers are prone to see this activity as judgmental rather than developmental.

Another reason for the unpopularity of peer observation among teachers may be the discomfort felt by being observed by a peer who is not competent enough to reflect upon the lesson being observed. In addition to peer observation, all the other collaborative activities are often made use of by most of the teachers. Although the majority find these practices important for their development, action research, which is also a reflective activity, doesn't receive much attention from the teachers. This activity is found to be important by half of the teachers, whereas the other half don't find it critically important to their development. This result may be due to a couple of reasons. Teachers may not have any or enough knowledge about action research and how to conduct it. Besides, they may be lacking the incentive, time, and available resources to conduct a research in their classes. This result may also indicate that teachers are not fully aware of what action research means, how it is undertaken and its benefits. Therefore, it could be a good idea to inform teachers about action research as a means of self-initiated development and encourage teachers to undertake action research and learn from their experiences with guidance provided in pre- and in-service trainings. Encouraging teachers to become their own classroom researchers can have a beneficial effect in all areas of the curriculum. It has potential for self-development and renewal (Nunan, cited in Richards & Nunan, 1990). Besides, as Richert (cited in Lieberman & Miller, 1991) states, action research generates genuine and sustained improvements in schools.

Regarding impediments to change and growth, all the listed factors that hinder growth and change in teachers are found to be important by the majority of teachers. Financial problems, strict working hours and therefore excessive workload are perceived to be important. This shows that teachers are aware of the fact that the best sources for professional development are themselves. In addition, they are aware that in order to take charge of their development and end with success in their efforts, motivation and willingness are crucial. Teachers need these so as to start and continue their professional development.

The findings of this study could contribute to the field of language teaching in general and professional development in particular. The findings would be of great help for language curriculum development and higher education centers. In addition, it has been recognized that the reconceptualization of what language teachers are and what they do is necessary. But the transformation will not occur in Iran or in other similar EFL contexts unless teachers themselves feel the need for such a transformation.

In terms of methodology, it has been recognized the limitation of this small case study using a questionnaire with a small group of participants. The ideal situation would be to conduct follow-up interviews with the teachers and observations of their classroom teaching, which can offer a much richer source of data. Also due to the small sample, we could not conduct more detailed analysis thus limiting us looking at the data only

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