

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT BETWEEN IRANIAN DISTANCE EDUCATION PNU EFL UNIVERSITY TEACHERS AND TRADITIONAL NON-PNU EFL UNIVERSITY TEACHERS

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ABSTRACT

Professional Development is a critical necessity in today's educational environment. The present research was based on the idea that teachers are professionals and they need professional development consisting of various processes of ongoing growth. We examined university teachers' attitude to professional development in a type of distance learning educational system in Iran and examined their attitudes with their counterparts teaching in on-campus educational systems. To this end, 70 Payame Noor EFL instructors and 70 non-Payame Noor EFL instructors from other public universities in Tehran, Iran were selected to conduct the research. A five-scale Likert questionnaire was designed and evaluated using confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) in order to determine to what extent PNU EFL instructors are involved in professional development and whether there is any significant difference between the level of professional development between them and non-PNU EFL instructors. Data were analyzed with SPSS 18.0 using both parametric and non-parametric statistical tests. The outcomes of this study identified that although PNU EFL teachers believed in increasing their professional development level, this belief wasn't very prevalent and a significant difference occurred between the extent of professional development between them and non-PNU EFL instructors.

Therefore, PNU EFL teachers need to develop a greater awareness of teaching in distance learning university systems while maintaining a high level of motivation to teach English in order to keep up with the changes of English language teaching in the world.

Keywords: PNU, Professional Development, Distance Learning.

INTRODUCTION

Professional development (PD) is a critical necessity in today's educational environments. Teachers are facing a quickly changing environment including new technology and new research about teaching and learning. Teacher development is the professional growth a teacher achieves as a result of gaining increased experience and examining his/her teaching systematically. Richards and Farrell (2005) have stated that professional development is a process of general growth and includes long-term goals and seeks to facilitate growth of teachers understanding of teaching and of themselves as teachers.

Professional development usually takes place after finishing formal training for the purpose of keeping up to date with advancements in different fields and it can be said that professional development is a never-ending process, a continuous process.

Ur (2002) in his article asks if English teachers can be called professionals. Do they belong to a community of professionals who interact and exchange ideas for the purpose of developing their professionalism? Are they a learning community which is interested in acquiring new knowledge and experimenting with new ideas? He continues, "English teaching has not yet reached the level of professionalism.... Some of the conditions described have not been realized" (p. 391). Wallace (1991) has also stated, "Development is something that can be done only by and for oneself" (p.3). So, it can be said that in order to develop professionally, teachers should feel a continuous desire to learn more about themselves as professionals, and about their profession.

According to Eekelen, Vermunt, and Boshuizen (as cited in Mushayikwa & Lubben, 2008, p. 2) "Self-directed professional development is defined as the professional development arising from the teachers' own initiative, i.e. the process is internally determined and initiated". Self-directed professional development provides the opportunity for a teacher to determine his/her own learning goals, which s/he considers to be of importance for her/him, lists the activities that they will help to reach that goal, the sources needed and the ways in which her/ his progress and accomplishments will be assessed (Sert, 2006). It is stated by Richards and Farrell (2005) that "self-directed learning is based on attitudes that encourage teachers to explore their own context and construct their own knowledge and understanding of what takes place in their classroom"(p.14).

Pettis (2002) has pointed out that a true professional teacher needs to meet three features: His/her approach to teaching, needs, and interest should change over time, even his/her professional development activities should change over the years, and a professionally competent teacher should upgrade his/her knowledge of language, language learning and teaching over the time. He/she should be interested in new development in their subject matter. True professional teacher should pay a special attention to personal and ongoing professional development activities. Villegas-Reimers (2003) emphasizes the advantages teachers might take from PD programs and believes that "successful professional developments have advantages such as positive impact on teachers' beliefs and practices, students' learning and on the planning of educational reforms" (p.19). Concerning the effect of teachers' professional development on students' learning, the study done by Tatto (1999) reported that the more professional knowledge teachers have, the higher the level of students' achievement. Currently in the world, most societies are engaged in some form of educational reform. It is emphasized by Villegas-Reimers that those reforms that have centered on teachers' professional development have been very successful. "The professional development of teachers is a key factor in ensuring that reforms at any level are effective" (2003, p.25).

In the last decades, Iran has progressed in depth and dearth in education and curriculum development. Accordingly, various higher education systems and programs have been designed to meet the ever-growing needs of the candidates to attend university.

To name, *distance education* (DE) has been supported extensively by the government and Payame Noor University (PNU) provides the candidates with DE in Iran. Petty (2005) has divided distance education into three models: pure distance, supported distance, and blended. The pure distance model is one in which students aren't required to have face-to-face contact with teachers and the student completes all assignments and assessments at a distance and submits them to the teacher with no need to physically come to an education agency at any point in the course of study. In the supported distance the student is required to come to an adult provider for intake and assessment, but instruction and study then occurs at a distance.

The student completes all assignments and assessments at a distance and submits them to the teacher via a distance modality. In blended system of distance learning there is limited face-to-face interaction. Unlike supported distance, however, blended models offer face-to-face contact to provide additional support for the student. The face-to-face interaction may take place in a variety of settings, including a classroom or a drop-in center. The face-to-face interaction is supplemental, not required, and is available for students as needed. The face-to-face time might be used to provide clarification on difficult assignments, practice oral speaking for ESL students or to provide additional resources and materials to the student. Assigning work, setting a timeline for students to complete assignments and establishing expectations about how the teacher will provide feedback can be done either at a distance or during a face-to-face meeting with the student. Regarding the models classified by Petty (2005), PNU in Iran might be a typical example of the blended distance education since in this type of system, as Uribe (2010, p. 4) states, "the majority of the instruction occurs when the student and instructor are not in the same place". So, PNU in Iran is not a pure distance education university inasmuch as students may attend a class maximally 4 to 8 sessions to resolve their leaning problems and there is a face-to-face interaction between teachers and students (although it isn't obligatory to take part in the classes). PNU, the only distance education university in Iran, is known as the biggest university in the Middle East. It contains 15 regions (Provincial study sections), 300 study centers, and units with more than 1,000,000 students (Govahi, 2008).

This study seeks to examine the attitudes and beliefs of Iranian EFL university teachers as far as professional development is concerned in two different educational systems. The aim of this research project is to concentrate on those professional development activities which are applied by teachers themselves (self-directed professional development and how important their work environment is in promoting their professional growth). Consequently, to deal with the requirements of the research, following research hypotheses were posed:

Research Hypothesis: 1

PNU EFL instructors do not think of professional development as vital in their success in students' learning.

Research hypothesis: 2

There is no significant difference between the level of professional development among PNU and non-PNU EFL instructors.

METHOD

Participants

To meet the requirements of the study, using stratified random selection, the participants were classified into two groups: PNU EFL instructors (female 31, male 28, n= 59) and non-PNU EFL instructors (female 16, male 43, n=59) from other public universities in Tehran province, Iran. In the present study, PNU instructors involve both full-time faculty members of PNU and the invited instructors and non-PNU involves instructors teaching in other public universities in Tehran. Table: 1 displays the participants' demographic attributes in details.

Table: 1
The Demographic Features of PNU and Non-PNU Participants in the Study

Participants	Gender		Employment		Degree		Age		
	man	woman	full-time	invited	Ph.D.	M.A.	25-39	40-59	> 60
PNU	28	31	23	36	22	37	41	19	2
Non-PNU	16	43	38	20	35	24	37	21	1

Materials

As the main source of data collection, reviewing different articles and questionnaires related to professional development, a five-scale Likert questionnaire was designed to determine the extent to which EFL university teachers pay attention to their professional development. The questionnaire contained 32 items. Applying confirmatory factor analysis (SPSS 18.0), we reduced 9 categories contributing to professional development: action research, reflective model, portfolio writing, observation of excellent practice, self-appraisal, discussion with colleagues, reading journals and books, taking part in conferences and participation in curriculum development. In fact, factor analysis was applied to determine to what extent the underlying constructs influence the responses on a number of measured variables. To make it easier to interpret the factors, varimax, which is the most commonly used procedure for orthogonal rotation, was used to maximize the variance between the factors so that each factor tends to load high on a small number of variables and low on the others.

The results of the confirmatory factor analysis using rotated solutions revealed that the first 10 questionnaire items load heavily on the first component (self-assessment), and the second seven questionnaire items load heavily on the second component (observation of excellent practice).

The third three questionnaire items load heavily on the third component (reading journals and books). The fourth two questionnaire items load heavily on the fourth component (self-assessment).

The fifth two questionnaire items load heavily on the fifth component (discussion with colleagues).

The sixth three questionnaire items load heavily on the sixth component (self-assessment).

The seventh three questionnaire items load heavily on the seventh component (discussion with colleagues).

The eighth questionnaire item loads heavily on the eighth component (writing professional article for journals).

The ninth questionnaire item loads heavily on the ninth component (taking part in conferences). The reliability of the instrument was then examined using split-half reliability with even-numbered and odd-numbered items. The obtained correlation was 0.95. Since the results of the split half technique are extremely dependant on how the halves are split, to compensate for the shortcomings of the split-half technique, Cronbach's coefficient alpha was also applied to measure the reliability and the correlation was 0.92.

Procedure

Before the final questionnaire was distributed to the sampled educators, it was piloted two times. The questionnaire was first piloted in order to detect the flaws existed and to evaluate the effectiveness of the instrument prior to its general distribution. The questionnaire was piloted at both Payame Noor (Tehran Branch) and Imam Sadegh University. Then, the questionnaire was distributed personally by one of the researchers to enable her to explain the purpose of the study, the exact meaning of the self-directed professional development, and some terms such as portfolio writing, action research, and so forth.

Data Analysis

The raw data taken from the questionnaire were recorded, analyzed, and interpreted. Applying normality analysis (graphical and numerical methods) as the first step of data analysis, it was revealed that data didn't follow normality assumptions. Figure: 1 displays the results of the graphical normality technique.

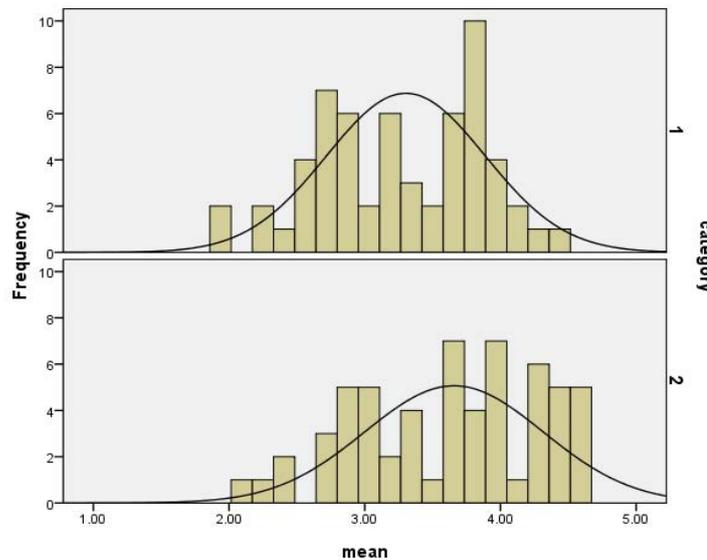


Figure: 1

The histogram of the mean score of PNU teachers (1), and non-PNU teachers (2)

It can be inferred from the figure that the distribution of the mean score of the PNU EFL teachers is not the same as the non-PNU EFL teachers.

Furthermore, the one sample Kolmogorov-Smirnov test, which is a numerical method and well known to determine if a sample comes from a normally distributed population, was selected as a numerical method. The observed value obtained by Kolmogorov-Smirnov Z is 1.082 which is higher than critical value at .192 level of significance for a non-directional test.

To test the first formulated research hypothesis, based on the data obtained from the normality analysis, both non-parametric Kolmogorov-Smirnov test and the parametric t-test was applied to determine whether there was a significant difference between the means of two samples. For the second research question, again both parametric and non-parametric tests were used. The non-parametric Mann-Whitney U Test for two unrelated samples was used to test whether or not the two independent samples were significantly different. As a parametric test, the independent samples t-test was used. There was no previous empirical evidence for differences in these means or for directionality.

Consequently, null hypotheses of no difference between group means were adopted and the significant level was set at $\alpha < .05$, non-directional.

RESULTS

The non-parametric Kolmogorov-Smirnov test, to Crammer (1997), "compares the empirical distribution function with the cumulative distribution function specified by the null hypothesis: the observed cumulative distribution function for a variable is compared with a specified theoretical distribution, which may be normal, uniform or exponential" (cited in Soleimani, 2009, p.71).

The null distribution of this statistic is calculated under the null hypothesis that the samples are drawn from the same distribution (in the two-sample case) or that the sample is drawn from the reference distribution (in the one-sample case).

For the purpose of the present research, two independent sample Kolmogorov-Smirnov test was applied to compare two samples (PNU EFL teachers and non- PNU EFL teachers) on one variable. This test determines whether one can reject the null hypothesis that two independent samples come from the same underlying population distribution or not.

This hypothesis is rejected at level. This means that the distribution of mean of PNU EFL teachers is not the same as non-PNU EFL teachers' (See Table 2).

Table: 2
Two-Sample Kolmogorov-Smirnov Test

Test Statistics ^a			mean
Most Differences	Extreme	Absolute	.271
		Positive	.271
		Negative	.000
Kolmogorov-Smirnov Z			1.473
Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)			.026
a. Grouping Variable: category			

Research Hypothesis 1

In the first phase of the study to examine to what extent PNU EFL instructors are involved in professional development, the formulated null hypothesis reads PNU EFL instructors do not think of professional development as vital in their success in students' learning. Since the normality assumption was rejected, we applied non-parametric One-Sample Kolmogorov-Smirnov Test in addition to its parametric equivalent to test the first research hypothesis.

Applying a one-sample t-test (N=59, M=3.26, SD=.61), the observed statistic (3.303) is greater than the critical statistic for $p < .002$ for a non-directional test, so the null hypothesis was rejected. Now it might be claimed that PNU EFL teachers believe in increasing their professional development level. But this belief isn't very prevalent.

The difference between the population mean and sample mean (3.2643- 3= .2643) is very low, so it can be concluded that not all of PNU teachers think of PD as vital in their success in students' learning. The results of One-Sample Kolmogorov-Smirnov test (N=59, M=3.26, SD=.61) is also inclined to reject the null hypothesis (Kolmogorov-Smirnov Z= 1.09, Sig. =0.17).

Research Hypothesis 2

The second null hypothesis reads there is no significant difference between the level of professional development among PNU and non-PNU EFL university teachers. Due to the nature of the data, to be on the safe side, both a parametric and a non-parametric test were applied.

Statistically speaking, Mann-Whitney U test which is a non-parametric test is analogous to the t-test except that it doesn't assume the assumption of normality of a distribution.

It is widely used to test whether or not the two independent samples are significantly different.

Cramer (as cited in Soleimani, 2009, p.76) states, the Mann-Whitney test determines "the number of times a score from one of the samples is ranked higher than a score from the other sample". If two samples are similar, the number of times this happens to each sample is same.

Table: 3
The results obtained from the non-parametric Mann-Whitney U test.

<i>Test Statistics</i>	
	mean
Mann-Whitney U	1210.500
Wilcoxon W	2980.500
Z	-2.854
Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	.004

a. Grouping Variable: category

The observed value obtained by Mann-Whitney U test is 1210.500 which is higher than critical value at .004 level of significance for a non-directional (two tailed) test. In other words, there is a significant difference between the distribution of PNU and non-PNU scores. In addition, the parametric equivalent of Mann-Whitney U, namely independent t-test, was applied as well to examine the results (See Table: 4).

Table: 4
Calculating Levene's Test

Independent Samples Test

			mean	
			Equal variances assumed	Equal variances not assumed
Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		F	.769	
		Sig.	.382	
t-test for Equality of Means		t	-2.972	-2.972
		df	116	114.553
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.004	.004
		Mean Difference	-.35699	-.35699
		Std. Error Difference	.12010	.12010
	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	Lower	-.59487	-.59490
		Upper	-.11911	-.11908

According to Table: 4 with calculating Levene's Test, the hypothesis of equality of variances is rejected at $1 - .382 = .618$ level. The test for Equality of Means is also rejected at $1 - .004 = .996$ level ($M_1 = 3.26$, $M_2 = 3.62$; $SD_1 = 61$, $SD_2 = 68$). The results obtained imply that PNU EFL teachers and non-PNU EFL teachers do not think of PD the same way.

DISCUSSION

Teachers are at the core of any teaching and learning process and teacher professionalism must increase if education is to improve. Teacher professional development has a noticeable positive impact on teachers' beliefs and practices. Besides, as teacher professional development plays a key role in changing teachers' skills and teaching methods, it does have an influence on students' learning and achievement.

Most teachers who have just graduated are probably experiencing the excitement and feeling of achievement from their graduation. However, they should also be aware from their first steps as professionals that learning to be a teacher is a life-long experience. The ultimate goal of teacher professional development is improving student learning outcomes. The process of becoming an experienced teacher who is aware of her/his own philosophy of teaching and learning, who can efficiently draw on and adapt content knowledge, and who is capable of making decisions before, during and after every teaching and learning experience does not take place right after college is over. Teacher training is a life long process, not an isolated event or activity. The training one gets before starting the profession is not an end in itself. It cannot be complete either. In the teaching profession, the pedagogic knowledge and skills a trainee teacher gets at the training college are not sufficient for his life long career. Teacher training may begin with a workshop as part of an orientation session; however, the success comes when there is an ongoing program. Follow-up activities should include meetings with faculty to work on specific design and production issues related to their content and course structure.

The first research question focused on the extent to which PNU EFL instructors were involved in professional development and whether they thought of PD as vital in their success in students' learning or not. Despite rejecting the null hypothesis (PNU EFL instructors do not think of professional development as vital in their success in students' learning), it can't be said that they firmly believe in increasing their professional development level. Statistically speaking, the difference between the population mean and sample mean ($3.2643 - 3 = .2643$) is very low, so it can be concluded that not all of PNU teachers think of PD as vital in their success in students' learning and this belief isn't very prevalent.

When planning for professional development for PNU teachers, the following are some of the decisions that need to be made:

- PNU should be asked to make clear its policies on teacher development. Although implicit policies regarding professional development exist, the existence of explicit, written policies on professional development for distance education is very necessary.
- Selection of appropriate teachers: Because distance education is so different from regular classroom teaching, it has implications for teacher training and care should be taken in selecting staff to ensure that new teachers are motivated to teach at PNU, they are sympathetic to, and willing to respond to, the special demands of distance education.
- Orientation programs are necessary for staff new to distance education. According to Pritchett (2004), an orientation workshop should include an orientation to the delivery system, analysis of prospective students, instructional design issues, interaction and learning activities, feedback and assessment, hands-on experience, and logistics of the distance learning program at the institution.
- There should be Institutional support for staff to attend conferences, undertake courses, and visit other distance education institutions.
- There should be a system for evaluating distance teachers: It should be determined how they will be evaluated and by whom and what the criteria will be used for evaluating them.

- **A culture should be created where participation in teacher development activities is a regular feature of life and is welcomed and there should be an atmosphere where each teacher respects for the professionalism of the her colleague.**
- **Responsibility for promoting staff development should be clearly defined.**
- **Professional development for PNU teachers should include three critical areas of knowledge: (a) content knowledge (deep understanding of their discipline), (b) pedagogical knowledge (instructional strategies), and (c) knowledge about the uniqueness of PNU learners (PNU has attracted learners from all walks of life. Typically a distance education course will have a great variety of learners than a conventional face-to-face class. Distance learners will often vary in age, educational attainment, social position, etc).**

If we want PNU offer more powerful learning opportunities for students, we must offer more powerful learning opportunities for teachers – opportunities that are grounded in a conception of learning to teach as a life long endeavor and designed around a continuum of teacher learning.

The second research question examined whether there is any significant difference between the level of professional development among PNU and non-PNU other public university EFL instructors. As mentioned before, in the literature some studies have been conducted to investigate the issue of professional development; however, no specific study has been conducted to focus on two definitely different educational systems, that is, distant education systems as Payame Noor and on campus educational systems.

The results of the present research reveal that clearly there is a significant difference between the level of professional development among PNU and non-PNU EFL teachers.

Possible explanation for these differences may be related to:

- **Employing young and middle-aged faculty at PNU: More than half of the respondents were between 30 to39.**
- **Low experience of PNU teachers: Seven PNU respondents (11.9 %) indicated that they had more than ten years teaching experience while 32.2% of non-PNU respondents had more than 10 years teaching experience.**
- **Employing part-time teachers by PNU: Most of the PNU respondents (61.0%) were part-time, while 39.0% of them were full-time. Of the 59 non-PNU teachers, 33.9% were temporarily employed, 66.1% were on the permanent staff.**
- **Employing graduate teachers by PNU: Of participants in the study, at PNU 62.7% of teachers held a master’s degree and 37.3% held Ph.D., while at non-PNU universities 59.3% held a Ph.D. degree.**
- **Working at other universities: many PNU teachers teach at other universities, so they might have little commitment to PNU and distance teaching.**

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

Regarding the great number of potential university students and the sense of responsibility of the government for the continuing education of the Iranian youth, PNU has provided a firm ground for the development of higher education throughout the country.

This necessitates the special attention to the important role of its teachers. Professional development is important for all teachers and it is very important for PNU EFL teachers. As a result of the lack of perfect face-to-face contact, instructors should develop strategies and instructions that lead to high interaction, such as, communication and participation in classes. EFL students of PNU are different from other students of this university because they study language and language is communication. So EFL PNU teachers "must develop in their learners the ability to communicate effectively in a wide range of professional and social context" (Finney, 2002, p. 69).

They should help their students learn how to learn. They should encourage individuals to become their own knowledge navigators, taking control of their learning.

One of the other problems of this university which is out of its teachers' hands is that many PNU EFL teachers face a dilemma between what they want to do and what they have to do because of the constraints imposed upon them by policies of PNU. There has been little sustained attention given to tutoring by distance education.

'The emphasis for staff development may need to be more from teaching skills to the development of emphatic skills or the ability to understand and respond to students feelings of hesitancy, uncertainty and inadequacy"(Iida, 2009, ¶8).

It is true that teacher development is voluntary, comes from the individual teacher, and teachers cannot be forced to develop, but what we believe is that they can be helped to develop. Not every teacher will be able to diagnose his/her problems and areas of weaknesses and be able to find appropriate solutions for them or realize his/her strengths and build on them. Teachers know what they really need and they are required to be actively involved in their PD but teachers alone cannot implement it effectively without a detailed plan built up by human resource manager.

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