Chapter 17

Setting New Standards for In-service Teacher Training: A Model for Responsive Professional Development in the Context of English Language Teaching

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ABSTRACT

The top-down approach to teacher professional development that is typical in the Turkish context has been highly criticized in recent years as failing to meet the practical needs of classroom practitioners. Amid increasing calls for a more meaningful approach to in-service training, the author was called on to develop and present a seminar for Turkish teachers of English as a foreign language that would support their understanding of a newly designed English language teaching. With the need for responsive teacher training in mind, the author designed a program that would encourage teachers to share their experiences in the classroom and to highlight their concerns. Furthermore, the program would provide opportunities for ongoing interaction between the participants and the author in terms of feedback on the process, the impact of the program, and sharing of resources and other information. This chapter provides a detailed description of the training program, which was offered in two separate modules for elementary and secondary EFL teachers. The author hopes that the program may provide a useful model for teacher trainers and program designers in providing an actionable approach to teacher development.

INTRODUCTION

In Turkey, full control of the educational process is maintained by the Ministry of National Education (MNE), a government body that oversees every aspect of public schooling. Under this centralized system, all prospective teachers receive their training through standardized national programs that are designed to address the specific subject areas in which they will teach. Likewise, ongoing training for in-service
teachers is carried out according to guidelines that are determined from above by MNE officials (Çelik, submitted; Çelik & Dikilitaş, 2015); and as a condition of their employment, all public school teachers are required to attend in-service training workshops on a periodic basis.

These MNE-mandated workshops are in some cases carried out by academics who are invited by educational administrators to conduct informational sessions on issues related to their discipline. Because they are paid very little for their efforts, these individuals may spend little time on preparation, relying instead on pre-fabricated content that is presented in a one-and-done lecture-type format. Rarely in these instances is there any opportunity for interaction between teachers and trainers, with few concessions for feedback or input by participants (Daloğlu, 2004). In other cases, the workshops may be carried out by classroom teachers themselves. For example, a group of teachers from a particular school or district may be called to a workshop in which each is expected to give a presentation on a given topic. With no incentive for participation in these workshops, aside from a notation on their record that they have completed the requirement, teachers generally consider them as held for the sake of form, and little attention is given to the content of their presentations. As such, the workshops are generally viewed as meaningless in terms of information and instead become essentially occasions for socializing.

Under these conditions, the practical needs of teachers (e.g., helping them to understand the requirements of the national curriculum; making them aware of new approaches and standards for teaching; or soliciting their questions and concerns about the challenges they face in the classroom) are largely ignored. The net result of this approach to in-service training is that the teachers who are meant to gain from the MNE-mandated workshops instead dismiss them, by and large, as a burdensome obligation (Bayrakçı, 2009).

This problem exists in virtually every subject area at the elementary and secondary levels of education, and English as a foreign language (EFL) is no exception. English has been highly emphasized as a core subject for decades, and all Turkish students are expected to develop a reasonable degree of proficiency by the time they finish their compulsory education term. Yet, in spite of a wide range of interventions aimed at improving learner outcomes, a satisfactory level of success has not yet been reached. Substandard teacher quality has often been faulted for this issue, and numerous attempts have been made to address the problem by improving the pre-service English language teacher training programs offered in universities. On the other hand, in the last several years, numerous researchers have also called the current state of in-service teacher training into question and suggested that a more effective approach to ongoing professional development of language teachers is needed (Bayrakçı, 2009; Çelik, submitted; Çelik, Bayraktar-Cepni, & İlyas, 2013; Daloğlu, 2004).

Amid the ongoing appeal for a more meaningful approach to in-service teacher training, I was invited in June of 2015 to prepare and present a seminar for EFL teachers working in the Turkish public school system. The seminar was intended to familiarize teachers with the reformed and updated English language teaching (ELT) programs for elementary school grades 2-8 and high school grades 9-12 that had recently been put into effect by the Ministry of Education. While considering the form that this training session would take, I had in mind the previously-mentioned concerns about in-service training, and I felt that an alternative model was called for: one that would take into account the actual needs of EFL teachers in relation to their individual teaching contexts, rather than simply telling them what they should be doing in the classroom. As such, I envisioned a training format that would allow for two-way interaction, encouraging teachers to voice their needs and concerns in an environment that was receptive to their ideas. Furthermore, I felt that an opening should be provided for an ongoing dialogue that would extend beyond the training session itself, thus allowing attendees to express their views on the process and share their reflections about the impact of the program on their practice.
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