

## PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMS AND ENGLISH LANGUAGE INSTRUCTORS: A CRITICAL-POSTMODERN STUDY\*

### İNGİLİZCE OKUTMANLARI VE MESLEKİ GELİŞİM PROGRAMLARI: BİR ELEŞTİREL-POSTMODERN ÇALIŞMA

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**ABSTRACT:** In this completed qualitative dissertation research, the nature of the relationship between professional development programs (in-service training programs) and English language instructors was studied with a critical postmodern lense focusing on the narratives of nine English language instructors on their experiences in their professional development programs. The results revealed that the instructors conceptualize these programs as domains in which they develop themselves professionally amidst many hardships that have the power of hindering their development. It is noted that such conceptualization has effects on their professional development as well as their own classroom teaching. Data collection method was in-depth interviewing and it was found that the instructors' narratives included themes of power struggles affecting their conceptualizations of teacher trainers, classroom observations, the delivering of these programs and the administrative units all of which signal the need for a shift towards more humanitarian and innovative professional development practices.

**Key Words:** Professional Development Programs, English language instructors, critical, postmodern.

**ÖZET:** Mesleki gelişim programları ve İngilizce okutmanları ilişkisini anlamlandırmaya yönelik bu tamamlanmış nitelik araştırmasına dayalı doktora tezinde okutmanların katıldığı hizmet içi eğitim programlarındaki uygulamalar katılımcıların deneyimleri yardımıyla incelenmektedir. Çalışma 9 katılımcıyla ve onların adı geçen programlardaki deneyimlerini elde etmeyi amaçlayan bir anlatı araştırması deseniyle tamamlanmış ve bu sürece eleştirel-postmodern bir bakış açısı rehberlik etmiştir. Çalışmanın sonuçları bize okutmanların bu programlardaki öğrenme deneyimlerinin onların bu programlara bakışlarını şekillendirirken onların mesleki gelişimlerinde ve İngilizce öğretimlerinde de etkili olduğunu göstermiştir. Çalışmada derinlemesine ve yüzyüze yapılan görüşmeler ve yorumlama basamağında da eleştirel teori ve postmodern yaklaşımlardan yararlanılmıştır. Bulgular, bu programlarda görülen erk kavgarlarını da ortaya çıkarmış ve bu gerçeğin de okutmanların özellikle öğretmen yetiştiricilerini, gözlemlerini, programı ve yönetimi anlama ve kavramada etkilediğini göstermektedir. Sonuç olarak okutmanların mesleki gelişmelerinin adı geçen programların dışında da sürdürüldüğü görülmekte ve programların güncel paradigmaları temel alacak şekilde yeniden yapılandırılmaları gerekliliği de ortaya çıkmaktadır.

**Anahtar Sözcükler:** Mesleki Gelişim Programları, İngilizce okutmanları, eleştirel, postmodern.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

### 1.1 Problem

A growing body of research on teacher education informs us that teacher education research disregards teachers' own conceptions and is poorly anchored to teachers' day-to-day situations and problems (Tisher & Wideen, 1990). For these researchers, teacher education research must be grounded in a more holistic view of what teachers know about their professions (Fang, 1996; Kuzmic, 1994). Among these voices, a particular group recognizes the importance of the teachers' past experiences and life histories on their own professional development (Boddycott, Walker & Kin, 2001; Carter, 1993; Clandinin & Connelly,

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1992; Taylor, 1996). Such knowledge will contribute to the holistic view that teacher education needs to attain in order to respond to the needs of the practitioners and of their professions (Clandinin & Connelly, 1992; Elbaz, 1991).

English language instructors in Turkey teach and develop themselves professionally through many formal and informal activities such as participating in teacher training and development sessions, attaining further degrees from universities, or following certificate programs at institutions such like the British Council. However, little has been written about how these instructors see their development in general and professional development programs in particular. Furthermore, amidst all the aforementioned calls for appropriating teacher education through the storied lives of teachers, it is urgent to listen to the voices of the English language instructors working within the Turkish universities where educational qualitative research is yet scarce and, therefore access to such storied knowledge is extremely limited (Dayı & Arıkan, 2001). Researchers need to capture all aspects of English language teaching which remains an important problem in Turkey where, in Özen's (2001) words, "the roles that individuals have to fill in their professional and personal lives vary so rapidly that it sometimes becomes difficult to follow and to keep pace with them" (62). Hence, much research is needed to capture the realities of English language instructors who seek professional development at the institutions they work.

## 1.2 Aim

To fill this gap in literature and to draw attention to the voices and needs of English language instructors in regards to how they perceive their place in the professional development programs to which they attend, this research focuses on the narratives of English language instructors on their professional development programs. Then, the main aim of this research is to show the relationship between the English language instructor and the professional development to which she or he attends in order to build onto the knowledge base in regards to the nature of these programs. Hence, the contents of these professional development programs must be studied carefully and from many points of departure since many academic, administrative, and professional entities such as teacher trainers who plan and deliver such programs seem to shape the current methodology and teaching situated at these programs. It is hoped that the results of such research will help improving professional development practices situated at the university level preparatory schools.

## 1.3 Postmodernism and Narratives

In such a research endeavor, critical theory and a postmodern approach are used, both being specifically interested in various forms of power regulating the society and through its institutions (Popkewitz & Brennan, 1998). From a critical postmodern lense, research on English as a Second/ Foreign Language has produced knowledge about those groups that are not advantaged within the educational and the social realm. Furthermore, a body of influential research has been published on ethnically, gender based, and culturally diverse students and teachers in relation to power and dominance (Auerbach, 1995; Benesch, 2001).

For the purposes of this research postmodernism can be summarized as a scrutiny of knowledge by pushing the limits of pre-established, value-laden practices that confine the self in his or her individual, social, academic, and political settings. Such a belief questions all concepts including objectivity, neutrality and scientific production since our assumptions about what constitutes everyday knowledge as well as academic knowledge, in deed, the very possibility of knowing, have been placed deeply into question (Martusewicz, 1992). In this research, for example, scientific objectivity is seen as a pitfall while trying to capture the realities of the participants as well as those of the professional development programs at the expense of writing down those realities as experienced no matter how unscientific they sound for the reader.

There is a close and inevitable relationship between postmodernism and narrative research. Lieblich, Mashiach and Zilber (1998) state that even though terms narrative and narrative research are used very

often, definitions of these terms are rarely provided. Although they do not provide their own definitions of these terms, they use Webster's entry for narrative as a "discourse, or an example of it, designed to represent a connected succession of happenings" (2) by claiming that narrative research refers to any study that uses or analyzes narrative materials. At the heart of narrative research flow the stories people tell as they "experience the world" (Clandinin & Connelly, 1992b). In such a *storied* research practice, the majority of literature is postmodern (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). It is also noteworthy that since the focus of postmodernism is argued to be power and its effects in the society (Popkewitz & Brennan, 1998), there is a deeply rooted relationship between power and the stories people tell as expressed through and in such narratives. Thus, this critical postmodern research is on the stories, with an insistence on under what conditions these meanings are made, how these meaning making processes are seen from various vantage points such as those held by the instructors, administrators, teacher trainers, and myself as the researcher. These, so it is believed, postulate the framework of a critical-postmodern research which aims to provide answers to the following questions.

#### **1.4 Research Questions**

The following questions guided this study while collecting instructors' narratives/ knowledge and analyzing them to illustrate their struggle for power as professionally developing individuals:

1. How do these particular English Language instructors experience and construct meaning regarding their professional development programs?
2. What are the points these instructors critique their programs?
3. What issues emerge from a critical-postmodern analysis of these narratives as illustrating their struggle for power as developing professionals?

## **2. METHOD**

### **2.1 Instrument**

Interviewing is described as "conversations with a purpose" (Dexter, 1970). The main purpose of an interview, thus, is to obtain a special kind of information (Merriam, 1998). This process of purposeful exchange of questions and answers separates conversations from interviews. In depth interviewing is selected as it is argued to be one of the best methods for accessing what individuals are thinking (Patton, 1980). Open-ended questions were asked to gather the participants' experiences, ideas, and reflections on their profession in general, and later, on their professional development programs as these became the focus of the present research.

### **2.2 Participants**

Nine English language instructors narrated their experiences situated at their professional development programs (in-service training programs). The participants are coming from five different universities, all in Ankara, Turkey. Three of these universities are private universities (namely, Atılım University, Başkent University and Bilkent University) while the other two are State universities (Hacettepe University and Middle East Technical University). The major criterion in selecting the participants was to interview those who could share their ideas and experiences without much hesitation. Similar to Patton's (1980) purposeful sampling, the interviewed instructors were those who could provide thick and detailed description of their professional development programs while evaluating them through their experiences. Furthermore, special attention was paid to choose instructors from diverse backgrounds and contexts rather than those who worked at the same school and shared similar experiences and views. Thus, a few participants who worked at the same school and shared similar social, cultural, and economic backgrounds were eliminated.

### 2.3 Data Analysis

As an example following the qualitative research tradition, this research endeavor does not aim to prove or present fixed results coming out of the data but it tries to show how individuals give meaning to their experiences. No consensus exists for the analysis of the qualitative data and those strategies that do exist advocate many similar as well as a few different processes (Creswell, 1998). However, in the analysis stage of this present research, a thorough and multiple reading of the data in comparison to every other participant's narrative produced the major themes upon which the written report was written. In such a process, the reading of the data brought its own conclusions through constant comparison of the hypothesis the result of which can be squeezed into the following findings and conclusion sections. Even though Bogdan and Biklen's (1992) data analysis scheme was used when needed, mainly, the data analysis steps proposed by Lieblich, Mashiach and Zilber (1998) were used. They can be summarized as follows:

1. The directions of study usually emerge from reading the collected material with no a priori hypothesis.
2. Hypothesis may be generated from these readings.
3. On the basis of a research question or hypothesis, all relevant sections of a text (transcribed material) are marked and assembled to form a new file or subtext.
4. The selected subtexts are categorized. The categories (themes or perspectives) are constructed through, in our case, reading of the subtext as openly as possible and defining the major themes that emerge from the reading.
5. Each category is, for the purposes of this research, used descriptively to formulate a picture of the content universe through which hypothesis can be drawn into conclusions and interpretations can be finalized.

### 3. FINDINGS

All of the participants raised their concerns about and critiqued their professional development programs at the institutional/structural level. The overarching theme that was constructed from their stories was that the instructors find professional development programs necessary for their professional development. However, making these programs compulsory and making the instructors abide by the rules, processes and outcomes of such strictly brings conflicts to these instructors. Such a conflict, thus, brings a power struggle between the deliverers of professional development programs and the language instructors. In light of these, the analyses of the narratives can best be categorized in terms of power struggles as follows:

#### 3.1 Institutional and Individual Professional Development

The narrative data shows that no professional development program grants total autonomy to the instructor in regards to planning his or her own professional development. However, the participants demand to be autonomous instructors whose development is sought and shaped in more individualized terms. Hence the narratives clearly show that these instructors are personally engaged with many out-of-work activities (including continuing Post-graduate studies) in the areas of translation, cultural studies, and literature all of which, they believe, add on to their development as ELT practitioners.

All instructors narrated that they want to spot their weaknesses and strengths as language teachers and then develop their skills accordingly, preferably with the help of a like-minded trainer who is willing to support the individual instructor in his or her mapping of his or her own professional development. Furthermore, the instructors admit that many activities they carry out outside their professional development programs are, in fact, helping them to develop as instructors even though their programs disregard, at worse, try to hamper these activities. One example is that even though their institutions support those instructors who plan to follow a course to attain a TEFL or ESL/EFL degree, other instructors who aim to attend degree or certificate programs in some other fields of study such as British literature or media studies were not

encouraged at all. The instructors also point that in the external professional development sessions they attended, their real classroom problems were valued and their practical needs were met while their institutional ones insisted on looking from the other side; that of the institution's needs and realities at the expense of disregarding those of the individual instructor's.

### 3.2 Transmittance of Knowledge and Instructors as Empty Slates

The instructors believe that their position in their professional development programs resembles an empty slate. It is noteworthy that they conceptualize their institutional professional development programs more as spoon-feeding while they criticize the current practice for being based on a simplistic, yet oppressive model similar to traditional classrooms in which the teacher (trainer) teaches while the students (instructors) act out the roles of the students. In short, instructors demand to be accepted as individuals with limitless background knowledge transcending beyond how some of their trainers view. For these instructors, some teacher trainers seek deficits by focusing more on what the instructor does not know on a specific classroom event or practice which is, then, explained by the trainer by use of technical ELT terminology. Such activity is interpreted by one participant as follows:

*"You have to put your labor in whatever you do. This applies to your professional development as well. They [the administrators and the trainers] do not really understand it this way. They act like they give the best and we get the best, so this whole thing is the best. Spoon feeding, as is such in every other thing, is a lie in this business. They have to realize this."*

### 3.3 Witnessing (Whose) Change (?)

Instructors are aware that many practices in their professional development programs change in time, under the influence of new theoretical and practical approaches to English Language Teaching and professional development. It is a crosscutting theme in all narratives that teacher trainers support these administrative and professional changes in the delivering of these professional development programs by claiming that such changes aim to create a positive learning and sharing atmosphere for these instructors. However, it is the instructors' argument that their voice is not audible in such changes since it is their experience that what their programs called "needs analyses" were far from capturing the instructors' daily realities. For these instructors, what followed these needs analysis procedures were changes in the delivering of these programs which didn't capture the essence of what these instructors had demanded in such needs analysis procedures.

The instructors do not disregard the importance of administrative or curricular innovations which affect their professional development but they often feel like they are being informed about such changes after those changes are decided and executed. In short, the instructors want to take part in the change rather than being made subjects of such treatments. The instructors argue that the top-down hierarchy seems to rule these programs with its putative formulae on instructors' professional development rather than a horizontal system which is more lenient to listening to the voices of the practitioners in the processes of change. It is noticeable that, as such claims suggest, such a professional development system that is conceptualized as an administrative organ is essentialist in its nature and it devalues the input of the practitioner in decision making processes. Calling the spirit of a more democratic system, in one participant's words, the silencing of the instructor works in these programs as the following:

*"I wrote it. When they [teacher trainers] asked us to write our ideas and needs that could be picked up in future workshops, I wrote that we didn't need a workshop on such and such topic but we really need workshops on this and that because we had these problems in our classrooms. I know everyone around me wrote the same thing. Then they [teacher trainers] brought the statistics of these feedback forms and according to them 80 % of the instructors wanted such workshops that had nothing to do with our needs. I mean even if one person wants, that is the majority anyway. Since the teacher trainer is going to do as he or she wishes,, it is not important what is told democratically."*

### 3.4 Quality: What about the administrators and teacher trainers?

As the interviews progressed, the instructors started to scrutinize the quality of their trainers. The educational background of each trainer is portrayed in a way to justify her success as a trainer. Surprisingly, only a few of their trainers were narrated to be qualified since, for the instructor, holding a degree in ELT should not be enough to be a trainer. Explicitly, the instructors narrated that they have witnessed the practice that anyone could be, and in fact became, a teacher trainer. Narratives reveal that many administrators hold their positions due to their age and experience as English teachers and teacher training positions, at times, were available to anyone who were interested, without considering the background knowledge and characteristics of such individuals. The result, often times, is the reality that some unqualified individuals get the posts that were most useful for these instructors in terms of their development. This problem with the quality of the staff is exemplified by an instructor as follows:

*"My colleagues teaching at other universities don't believe me that our head administrator is a retired instructor who has never studied English Language Teaching.... They are also shocked when they hear that her [the administrator's] English is so awful that she makes grammar mistakes in the simplest sentences and her pronunciation is worse than many of our students'. The worst, she plays card games at her office thanks to her computer. Shall I go on?"*

### 3.5 Observations

All instructors except one asserted that they have experienced discomfort in observations, be it conducted by a peer, by an administrator, or a teacher trainer. However, a common thread weaving all these narratives was that these observations are superficial, mechanical, and fake classroom events that do not reflect actual classroom practices of the observed but create their own detached reality. This conflict is best experienced in one participant's words as follows:

*"They come to observe you. In that lesson, well, we are perfectly well prepared like a newly wed bride [in Turkish; yeni gelin gibi, meaning all perfect and ready] and we appear on the stage and everything seems wonderful! We make sure we start up with a warm-up and always end the lesson with production. We make sure the punch line, the end, is completed well. One thing is missing though; when they come to observe you, they see you in your best state of teaching since you are well prepared specifically for this observation. Therefore, I mean, this observation can never give a reliable feedback for your teaching. It is not random. It is like... you are like... the kid in the exam, you are at the peak point of your performance as a teacher. The problem is; how many times in a semester your performance is like that in your teaching? Once! And it is when you are observed".*

### 3.6 Attitudes and Teacher Trainers

The teacher trainer appears to be an authority figure in these narratives who has power over the instructor, being at the midway between the instructor and the administration. Even though all instructors gave the names of two specific teacher trainers as role models for all teacher trainers with their respect and positive attitude to the trainees along with valuable academic and professional support, negative examples seem to reoccur in all narratives. Many experiences are shared in these interviews some of which show the oppressive and even vulgar side of professional development experience lived by these instructors. In the extreme, one instructor claimed that during one of the debriefing sessions, the trainer approached the instructor with a verbally derogatory term, which wounded the instructor as she claims. Adding that the instructors are aware of nepotism and backing pertaining into these programs, the instructors portray that the attitudes of the teacher trainers determine the relationship (and thus, the success of such a relationship) between the instructor and the trainer. As one participant narrates, instructors expect a teacher trainer to possess certain qualities among which her interpersonal skills as well as her own perception of her place in professional development programs are of utmost importance:



*"I cannot talk to my teacher trainer about my concerns and problems related to my classroom and teaching. My teacher trainer will not give me anything but stress. She will preach me through a couple methods that come from up above from those academic journals, coming to us out of nowhere, and with such a snobbish attitude. She will, then, talk to me about a theory nobody knows where it comes from and at last she will show me the weaknesses in my own teaching by putting me down after telling me how she does things and how I should follow her."*

### **3.7 The mask of the goddess: Methodology**

The instructors dislike the practice in which, in its simplest sense, the trainer uses the term methodology, to support her view point on any issue discussed or shared. The majority of the interviewees spoke of methodology as the masking of some trainers to hide or, simply, to exclude the conflicting view of the trainee out of the discussion. As Candlin (1995) warns, research has often demonstrated that methodological bits and pieces are often presented as sets of methodological truths without which teachers cannot teach, creating a false reality surrounded by these recipes of ills (xi). Issues related with methodology has been a concern for these instructors partly because trainers' conceptualization and teaching of methodology contrasts with classroom realities. Articulated as decontextualized knowledge by these instructors, this problem is described by one participant as follows:

*"Here we go again. There is always this mentality. We always have the English Language Teaching methodology coming from another galaxy. What about us? What about a method that works in our classrooms? In Turkey? In Ankara?"*

## **4. CONCLUSION**

This doctoral dissertation study examines the experiences and the struggle of language instructors in their professional development programs. It is hoped that by studying these programs from a critical postmodern perspective we may arrive at new pedagogical and curricular possibilities (Fay, 1987) to transform the lives of the participants (Morrow & Brown, 1994). This study suggests that in addition to the struggles and resistance of these instructors that call for a re-conceptualization of these programs, the instructors' narratives challenge many other institutional practices where their professional development programs are delivered. While the instructors critiqued their trainers, observations, sessions and the meetings, they also critiqued many context-dependent events that showed the effects of external as well as internal power struggles diffusing in these programs and effecting the development of these language instructors. Illuminated first as personal struggles, the realities of the sociopolitical order are not only seen as effects that can be felt but as procedural components of their programs. Significantly, these instructors challenge these realities despite the fact that we cannot claim such resistance brings an end to such negative realities affecting them. However, we can certainly claim that their resistances disrupt the ongoing events in their programs as can be seen in the data.

Realizing our present conditions within these professional development programs, as well as within all institutions, can be a first step toward creating or joining in alliances, unions, or professional organizations like TESOL at large and local establishments such as INGED in particular to have a voice in what matters for us. In Chomsky's (1994) words, if one "joins with other people, one can make changes. Millions of things are possible, depending on where one wants to put his or her efforts" (106). A second step can be to act together to continue telling our narratives to show, to tell, to witness our realities that we want to, or in better terms, we have to change. Third, which signals not an end but a birth, is that we commit ourselves to understand and continuously check on what we do, where we do, and under what conditions we do teach. This includes re-narrating and reevaluating our experiences while teaching, learning, oppressing, silencing, and liberating all of which require sensitivity and awareness.

The current literature salient in second/foreign language teacher education, in short, signals a shift towards an academic and rigorous study and understanding of the local, the individual, and the social, as these have been neglected in previous research. While doing this, researchers also warn that the mainstream and widespread model of language teacher education programs is characterized by imposing rather than inviting the individual language teacher that is also and strongly supported by my findings, and this persistent reality has to be challenged if change is expected. While doing that, we need serious and emic oriented research that give accounts of the needs of the practitioners and how they visualize, experience, and live in their socio-educational environments all of which may help us to build a pedagogy that fits but not limits. Kumaravadivelu (2001) summarizes this point below:

*[...] As a pedagogy of possibility, postmethod pedagogy rejects the narrow view of language education that confines itself to the linguistic functional elements that obtain inside the classroom... The boundaries of the particular, the practical, and the possible are inevitably blurred. They interweave and interact with each other in a synergistic relationship in which the whole is greater than the sum of its parts (545).*

For these instructors, professional development is a life-long process that involves not only their educational backgrounds but also their experiences inside and outside their schools- their interactions with their peers and colleagues, observations, studies, and hobbies as well as interactions with social and political organizations through which development takes place. Such views, of course, run counter to the official demand to disregard the value of individual engagements in professional development programs.

These instructors, thus, narrated their personal and collective struggles, first, to change this narrow conceptualization of professional development that is leading their programs. Such a struggle is important from a critical perspective in educational studies, highlighting the importance of the political nature of the choices that confront teachers and educators in their day-to-day work lives (Beyer, 1988). That is to say, these instructors show their resistance to the traditional understanding of educational practices that finds its support in the traditional structuring of the university system in Turkey. These narratives, in contrast, represent the political choice of these instructors for improving the system by considering the voices of these practitioners in the process of change.

First of all, the instructors treat professional development programs as if they were the *control mechanisms* mediated by the trainers, the administrators of the English Preparatory Schools, the university as an institution, and by the Higher Education Council. For these instructors, all of these institutional apparatuses demand strict professional and academic standardization with a presupposition that being univocal is essential in development; be it the country with its ethnic, linguistic, and religious appearance, or the university that is framed and mobilized with the same intuition; continuous progress characterized by univocal hierarchy. The ongoing attempts of Higher Education Council to standardize all aspects of university life including clothing, research, and promotion make better sense after reading the narratives of these instructors in which their multiplicity and conflicting images and ideas of the instructors contrast with the essentialist demands of these authorities. Thus, the instructors' reactionary insistence on conceptualizing their professional development programs as control mechanisms is recognizable and important while understanding these programs.

The core of the narratives calls for a democratic professional development program. Such research exemplifies the present practice as mandatory, resisted by the instructors who have taken part in this research. A democratic professional development practice in/for English language teaching is inclusive and not mandatory and it empowers the practitioner through locating and answering her needs, often, through collaboration with others, rather than fulfilling the expectations of the others; the administrators and the teacher trainers, as this present practice constitutes.



Even though many current professional practices focus on what to teach unto the practitioners, the participants articulated their concern for *how* these programs are delivered and by *whom*, rather than *what* really is taught in these programs. For these instructors, educational practices offered in these programs, in short, resemble, in many ways, what Foucault (1977: 182) calls a process of *normalization* which functions as modern disciplinary power that pushes the individuals to accept the principle of a rule to be followed. This activity, as these narrators suggest, diminishes professional development rather than activates it.

This study focused on the storied experiences of the instructors while we need the stories coming from the rest of the agents; namely, trainers, administrators, students, and even the personnel who currently work at preparatory schools (and universities at large) so that we can have a more adequate, detailed, emic (participant) oriented, holistic, and useful data through which we can direct our classroom practices and professional development. From a critical perspective, programs and research that ignore the needs and possible liberation of their subjects by veiling knowledge also deny teachers the right to self-direction, and at the end, as put by Kincheloe (1995: 82) “teacher education that ignores the emancipatory interest ends up only ankle-deep in the school ocean, missing a kaleidoscope of undersea activity.”

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