Iranian High School EFL Teachers’ Perception of Professional Obstacles in terms of Academic Qualification, Years of Experience

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ABSTRACT

The aim of the present study is to investigate different professional development obstacles faced by EFL senior high school teachers. More specifically, the present study examines the role of academic qualification and years of experience in teachers’ professional obstacles, which are defined as a combination of Instructional Professional Obstacles (IPO), Self-Directed Professional Obstacles (SDPO), and Work Related Professional Obstacles (WRPO). The participants were 100 EFL high school teachers who were teaching in senior high schools in Isfahan. They were selected based on availability sampling procedures to respond the questionnaire. A questionnaire from Herzallah (2011) was adapted, translated, and utilized in order to gather the intended data. Then, descriptive statistics as well as inferential statistics were conducted on the collected data. In this regard, Multiple Analyses Of Variance (MANOVA) was employed for two research questions of the study. Academic qualification failed to significantly influence EFL teachers’ attitudes toward professional obstacles as a composite construct. However, SDPO was significantly affected by academic qualification of the teachers, whereas IPO and WRPO were not. Years of teaching experience could not exert significant effects on the teachers’ attitude toward professional obstacles as a combined variable. However, WRPO was shown to be under the influence of teaching experience. IPO and SDPO were, on the other hand, far from being affected by the variable of teaching experience.

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1. Introduction

English holds a dominant position in today’s world. To put it in Talebinezhad and Aliakbari (2001) words, “at this point in the world’s history, English is the pre-eminent language of wider communication. It is used as a library language, as the medium of science, technology and international trade, and as a contact language between nations and parts of nations” (P. 1). Razmjoo and Riazi (2006) state that teaching English as a Foreign Language (EFL) is a challenging task in developing countries in general and in our country in particular. Forty years ago, the assumption about teaching English used to be different in comparison with today’s assumption. Teaching English was a politically neutral activity and learning English lead to educational and economic improvement. Today, this situation has changed more or less. Now, English is the language of globalization, international communication, commerce, media, and culture. Therefore, different motivations for learning English come into every body’s consideration.
Freeman and Johnson (1998) argue that the core of language teacher education must center on the activity of teaching itself, the teacher who does it, the context in which it is done, and the pedagogy by which it is done. Taking all these factors into consideration, it seems obvious that the teacher, as an essential component in education systems, can play an important role in attaining the educational objectives of the programs. Although there are a lot of learning resources, none of them are effective unless directed by a reliable English language teacher as a main input component in the learning (Whitehead, 1989; Korthagen, 2004; Panwar, 2007; as cited in Herzallah, 2011). Educational setting in Iran is rather complicated. At this time, English dominates the context of foreign language learning and teaching in Iran. Learning English starts at the age of 13 in high schools and it continues up to university levels. Although students study English for a long period of time in schools (almost 7 years), the outcome is not satisfactory. The students do not gain the intended ability to use their knowledge in real contexts. Consequently, the main concern in education is the reason why, despite all the money, time, and efforts spent, Iranian students are not as proficient in learning English as expected. Kariminia and Salehizade (2007) claim that some students who pass the university entrance exam do not even know the basics of the language while some of them know absolutely nothing. Therefore, teaching them resembles waking up a dead body. In educational contexts, all of the teachers certainly face some obstacles which might arise from a variety of reasons. This situation can become worse for second language teachers because they deal with second language which itself could be problematic for learners, especially in high schools. Moreover, university entrance exam has an important place in education system of Iran. If students learn in an ideal educational condition, they will get prepared for the exam properly. Consequently, they will have a great chance to be accepted for their favorite major in the university. Therefore, in addition to the difficulty of teaching second language, maintaining good relationship with high school learners is significant and can be considered as another obstacle. These obstacles impede the process of teaching and learning. So, they should be addressed at the starting point of teaching.  

1.2. Research Question

The following questions are worth being investigated and answered:

1. Are there any statistically significance differences in Iranian high school EFL teachers’ perception of professional obstacles in term of academic qualification?
2. Are there any statistically significant differences in Iranian high school EFL teachers’ perceptions of professional obstacles in term of years of experience?

The objective of the present study is to investigate the obstacles of high school English language teachers’ professional development form their point of view in order to determine the professional development obstacles that high school English language teachers face, measure if there are significant differences in teachers’ perceptions due to academic qualification and years of experience, and suggest solutions for high school EFL teachers’ professional development obstacles.

2. Review of the Literature

2.1. EFL teachers’ professional development

Dfes (2000) believes that professional development includes every action which improves teachers’ knowledge, skills, and their effectiveness in the schools. It is the reflection of whole things that teachers do to be well-prepared and up to date. According to Desimone, et al. (2006), "professional development is considered as an essential mechanism for deepening teachers’ content knowledge and developing their teaching practices. Consequently, teacher professional development is a major focus of current educational reform initiatives" (P. 181). Damavand et al., (2013) believe that although most of teachers do not accept these programs because they are formal and cannot present anything in terms of knowledge and progress, they can find a perfect opportunity during professional programs to share their experiences for finding solutions related to the potential problems.

2.2. The importance of EFL teachers’ professional development

Atay (2006) believes that the idea of continuing and lifelong professional learning for teachers in all fields is very important that several researchers have focused on it greatly in their studies. There has been a growing recognition attracting the educators’ attention about the importance of teachers in student achievement. However, the majority of them, especially new ones, are not qualified enough to provide the students with their requirements, and many experienced teachers need to adjust their knowledge to new standards. According to Sabzian, et al. (2013), "Just like practitioners in other professions, teachers need to expand their knowledge and also improve their skills over the years of their careers (P. 3). In this regard, taking the professional development as a magnificent factor in education, Raza (2010) conducted a research to explore the perception of experienced English teachers as foreign language teachers who were teaching in the United Arab Emirates universities. The teacher’s choices of professional development initiatives and the reason which impacted on their choices were studied thoroughly. Moreover, teachers’ suggestions for
improving continuing professional development were explored. Teachers with a minimum of five years teaching experience were interviewed. The obtained results showed that the participants considered the continuing professional development as lifelong professional. The participants’ great concern was learning through activities which provided them with great opportunities for dialogue and collaboration.

2.3. EFL teachers’ professional development obstacles

Teaching English as a Foreign Language (EFL) or as a Second Language (ESL) brings about many obstacles. All those obstacles might hinder effective EFL teachers’ professional development. With regard to this issue, there are times when teachers have to tackle with problems at class. Tommy (2002), in his survey in China, mentioned three main problems that teachers face and affect their performance in their classrooms:

1. Finances: the payment is very low in comparison with other professions. Although, the salary is enough to live on, it is not adequate for other higher expenses.
2. Living condition 3. Culture

Based on Tommy’s (2002) findings, these problems will impede the teachers’ educational progress in their career. Consequently, the teachers’ professional progress should be accounted for more seriously because the more teachers’ progress in their job, the better students’ benefit in the context of classroom. Cheng and Wang (2004) reported a survey study that was related to 47 in-service secondary EFL teachers of English who were attending a six-week summer professional development program in a teacher college in China in 2002. The main aim was to figure out teachers’ professional development beliefs and activities. The obtained results showed that group of secondary school teachers of English are not well-prepared in their subject matter. The challenges related to teaching context were large classes and the standardized testing. In this regard, system computer-based and computer-assisted teaching and learning technology were the most important professional development needs to solve the challenges. Moreover, the finding revealed that time is necessary for teachers to make professional development an enduring part of their work.

3. Methodology

3.1. Participants

The participants of the present study consisted English teachers who teach in high schools in Isfahan. 100 English high school teachers were randomly selected based on availability to answer the questionnaire. The total number of returned questionnaires was 70 because some of the questionnaires were not returned by teachers. The female EFL teachers were 59 and the male EFL teachers were 11. This sampling procedure was chosen because the selected sample was to be representative of the population. After getting the permission from the secretary of the education department in Isfahan, this number of population was taken to get data. After that, those 100 questionnaires were administered among some high schools to get the intended data. None of teachers was retired. Moreover, all of them were appointed as official teachers and were going to work for a long period of time. Consequently, it was possible to have more practical results which can be used in relation to a lot of students each year.

3.2. Instruments

A questionnaire was chosen as an investigating tool in this study in order to identify the professional obstacles that Iranian high school English teachers face. This questionnaire was from a thesis written about the professional development obstacles facing primary English language teachers in Northern Gaza by Ahmed Akram Herzallah (2011). Since it was not suitable to be run in educational context of Iran, it was adapted to get closer to the current cultural and educational situation in Iranian high schools. Moreover, it was necessary to translate the questionnaire into Persian to make sure to have higher level of validity and reliability in this investigating tool. The justification for translating was to help the participants to grasp different parts of the questionnaire completely. Consequently, their responses could be more precise and realistic. Then, pilot testing was done to remove all weak points of the questionnaire. Besides, the questionnaire was examined in terms of reliability and validity. The Cronbach alpha reliability coefficient of the questionnaire was calculated by the researcher and it was equal to .84 which could be considered a good index. As far as validity was concerned, three experienced TEFL professors studied and approved of the questionnaire. This questionnaire was in the form of 5-choice Likert scale and was used as the main tool of gathering the data about the professional obstacles. The questionnaire included two parts. The first part was allocated to collect information about the respondents’ gender and age. The second part was designed to the following three domains of professional obstacles:

A. Institutional professional obstacles
B. Self-directed professional obstacles
C. Professional obstacles from the nature of the work

3.3. Procedure

A questionnaire was administered to 70 English language teachers in order to answers to the questions about the professional development obstacles that EFL teachers face in high schools in Isfahan. This study needs a descriptive design and quantitative measurement. There were two variables in this study,
dependent variable and independent variable. The independent variables are academic qualification and years of experience. The dependent variable which is a comprising one relates to EFL teachers’ professional obstacles. The different parts of this variable are instructional professional obstacles, self-directed professional obstacles, and work related professional obstacles.

3.4. Data analysis

Descriptive statistics as well as inferential statistics were used in order to analyze the data and obtain the results. Regarding inferential statistics, Multiple Analysis Of Variance (MANOVA) was employed for the research questions of the study since in each research question, there was a categorical independent variable (e.g. academic qualification and years of experience) and more than two dependent variables which were related (i.e. the scores for the three parts of the questionnaire: institutional professional obstacles, self-directed professional obstacles, and professional work related professional obstacles). In this way, the MANOVA revealed whether each of the independent variables of the study had a significant effect on the composite variable of EFL teachers’ attitudes toward professional obstacles which was a combination of the three parts of the questionnaire. Moreover, the MANOVA manifested whether each of the independent variables of this study affected each of the dependent variables (i.e. the three parts of the questionnaire: institutional professional obstacles, self-directed professional obstacles, and professional work related professional obstacles).

4. Results

The aim of the present study was to investigate the professional obstacles faced by high school EFL teachers. This study enjoyed an ex-post facto design and investigated the relationships between academic qualification and years of experience on the one hand, and EFL teachers’ professional obstacles on the other hand. As mentioned before, among the teachers in Isfahan Province, a number of 100 EFL teachers were randomly selected to fill out the Professional Obstacles Questionnaire. As one might expect, some of the teachers failed to return the questionnaire and thus the total number of returned questionnaires was 70. The obtained data were analyzed by SPSS. In this section, the results of the statistical analyses as well as the findings are presented and discussed according to the two research questions posed in this study.

4.1. Results of the First Research Question

The first research question intended to unveil whether there were any statistically significance differences in teachers’ perception about high school language teachers’ professional obstacles due to the academic qualification variable. The assumption was that the high school EFL teachers would have the following qualifications: B.A. or M.A. degrees and in rare cases higher degrees. The results of the questionnaire, however, showed that all of the respondents had received B.A., or M.A. and above. Since here again, there was an independent categorical variable (i.e. academic qualification) and three related dependent variables, MANOVA was conducted.

Table 4.1: Descriptive Statistics for Comparing Participants with Different Academic Qualifications

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>AQ</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Std. Deviation</th>
<th>N</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>IPO</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BA</td>
<td>99.6939</td>
<td>13.67663</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MA/Above</td>
<td>102.5238</td>
<td>13.89467</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>100.5429</td>
<td>13.70358</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SDPO</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BA</td>
<td>68.3878</td>
<td>9.71000</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MA/Above</td>
<td>73.5714</td>
<td>9.69315</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>69.9429</td>
<td>9.92710</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WRPO</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BA</td>
<td>47.3878</td>
<td>8.24575</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MA/Above</td>
<td>48.9524</td>
<td>5.84360</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>47.8571</td>
<td>7.59726</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4.1 displays the mean scores and standard deviations of the participants holding B.A. or M.A./Above for IPO, SDPO, and WRPO sections of the questionnaire. There were discrepancies between the mean scores of the two groups of participants on IPO, SDPO, and WRPO. Yet, one should check the Sig. column in Table 4.2 to know whether the differences between B.A. and M.A. and other degree holders are statistically meaningful.

Table 4.2: MANOVA Results for Comparing Participants with Different Academic Qualifications

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Value</th>
<th>F</th>
<th>Hypothesis</th>
<th>Error df</th>
<th>Sig.</th>
<th>Partial Eta</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

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In Table 4.2, Wilk’s Lambda Sig. value equals .19, which is greater than the specified level of significance (.19 > .05). This means that academic qualification, as a composite variable, had no effect on the attitudes of the respondents. However, the between-subjects Table 4.3 ought to be checked to see whether B.A. and M.A./Above holders were different in relation to their attitudes toward IPO, SDPO, or WRPO.

Table 4.3: Between-Subjects Results for Comparing Participants with Different Academic Qualifications

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source</th>
<th>Dependent Variable</th>
<th>Type III Sum of Squares</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>Mean Square</th>
<th>F</th>
<th>Sig.</th>
<th>Partial Eta Squared</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>AQ</td>
<td>IPO</td>
<td>117.725</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>117.725</td>
<td>.623</td>
<td>.433</td>
<td>.009</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>SDPO</td>
<td>394.996</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>394.996</td>
<td>4.194</td>
<td>.044</td>
<td>.058</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>WRPO</td>
<td>35.986</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>35.986</td>
<td>.620</td>
<td>.434</td>
<td>.009</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In Table 4.4, the mean scores and standard deviations of the participants with different years of experience for IPO, SDPO, and WRPO are presented. There were obviously differences among teachers with varying years of experience on the variables of IPO, SDPO, and WRPO. Nonetheless, it needs see the p value under

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the Sig. column at the following MANOVA table to figure out whether the differences among them were statistically meaningful or not.

**Table 4.5: MANOVA Results for Comparing Participants with Different Years of Experience**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source</th>
<th>Type III Sum of Squares</th>
<th>F</th>
<th>Sig.</th>
<th>Partial Eta Squared</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pillai’s Trace</td>
<td>625.429</td>
<td>2.982</td>
<td>.038</td>
<td>.119</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wilk’s Lambda</td>
<td>401.411</td>
<td>1.380</td>
<td>.257</td>
<td>.059</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Roy’s Largest Root</td>
<td>475.326</td>
<td>2.982</td>
<td>.038</td>
<td>.119</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Roy’s Largest Root</td>
<td>66.000</td>
<td>.019</td>
<td>.019</td>
<td>.038</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The Wilk’s Lambda Sig. value in Table 4.5 is .18 which is greater than the specified level of significance (.18 > .05). This implies that teachers’ attitudes as a combination of IPO, SDPO, and WRPO were not affected by the varying teaching experiences of the participants. Nevertheless, the between-subjects Table 4.6 ought to be checked to see whether teachers with different years of experience were different in relation to their attitudes toward IPO, SDPO, or WRPO.

**Table 4.6: Between-Subjects Results for Comparing Participants with Different Years of Experience**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source</th>
<th>Dependent Variable</th>
<th>Type III Sum of Squares</th>
<th>F</th>
<th>Sig.</th>
<th>Partial Eta Squared</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>IPO</td>
<td>625.429</td>
<td>2.982</td>
<td>.038</td>
<td>.119</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SDPO</td>
<td>401.411</td>
<td>1.380</td>
<td>.257</td>
<td>.059</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WRPO</td>
<td>475.326</td>
<td>2.982</td>
<td>.038</td>
<td>.119</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In Table 4.6, it is only the WRPO Sig. value which is less than the alpha level (.03< .05). This means that years of teaching experience affected the teachers’ attitudes toward work related professional obstacles but not their attitudes towards instructional professional obstacles (.32 > .05) or towards self-directed professional obstacles (.25> .05).

5. Discussions and Conclusions

The research questions of the present study were supposed to investigate the relationships between academic qualification and teaching experience on the one hand, and EFL teachers’ professional obstacles on the other hand. Therefore, the results of the study can be discussed as follows:

5.1. Findings related to the first question

The first research question focused on the perceptions of EFL high school teachers on professional development in accordance with academic qualification. The results proved that academic qualification failed to significantly influence EFL teachers’ attitudes as a composite construct. This shows that academic qualification is not significantly related to professional obstacles teachers encounter. The result related to this question is exactly similar to the findings of Herzalla (2011).

5.2. Findings related to the second question

The second research question is mainly related to the number of working experience years. The results related to this question indicate that years of teaching experience could not exert significant effects on the teachers’ attitude as a combined variable. This implies that years of experience are not significantly related to professional obstacles teachers encounter. One the other hand, the findings related to academic qualification and years of experience were in the similar line. In a similar way, the findings of Herzalla (2011) showed that there were no statistically significant differences between the perceptions of the four experience groups about professional development obstacles in the third domain that concerns with the nature of the work. The reason is that all teachers work in the same conditions. However, the study of Soproni (2007) revealed that there were statistically significant differences between the four experience groups in their perceptions about professional development obstacles in the first (institutional), the second (self-directed), and the overall degree. Scheffe test was used to determine direction of the differences. The results showed that there were statistically significant differences between the experienced and inexperienced EFL teachers. Similarly, the study of Raza (2010) showed that the perception of experienced English teachers as foreign language teachers is very important. The teachers’ choices of professional development initiatives and the reason that impacted on their choices were studied. Moreover, teachers’ suggestions for improving continuing professional development were examined. Therefore, teachers with a
minimum of five years teaching experience were interviewed. The ultimate results revealed that the participants considered continuing professional development as a lifelong professional process. Professional development is one of the most essential issues in the area of teacher education that absolutely leads to both teachers’ progress in their career and students’ promotion in their education. However, it is unavoidable for EFL teachers to face different obstacles that hinder their progress. Therefore, getting familiar with different obstacles in this regard could be of great importance for EFL teachers to overcome them and to achieve their educational goals in their profession. There are a number of researchers who have studied professional development obstacles that EFL teachers face but there was no researcher who investigated the professional development obstacles which EFL high school teachers face in Iran. EFL teachers’ perceptions can bring about some beneficial effects in learning about different educational obstacles. Therefore, the present study was mainly based on EFL teachers’ perception about Iranian high school EFL teachers’ professional obstacles due to different factors such as: academic qualifications and the number of working experience years. Academic qualification failed to significantly influence EFL teachers’ attitudes, as a composite construct, towards professional development obstacles. However, SDPO was significantly affected by academic qualification of the teachers, whereas IPO and WRPO were not. Years of teaching experience, as an independent variable, could not leave significant effects on the teachers’ attitude, as a combined variable, towards professional development obstacles. However, WRPO was shown to be under the influence of teaching experience. IPO and SDPO were, on the other hand, impervious to the variable of teaching experience. Years of teaching experience and academic qualification were not such factors to be related to professional obstacles teachers encounter.

References


