

Autonomy-Guided Professional Development in Higher Education

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Abstract

Continuous Professional Development (CPD) has been one of the cornerstones of quality assurance and improvement practices as monitored by accrediting agencies. With many studies reporting inefficiency of traditional CPD methods, institutions are in pursuit of forming their new CPD agendas that are context sensitive. With this in mind, this case study reports the findings of a newly launched CPD program in an effort to integrate teacher autonomy into CPD at the School of Foreign Languages of a Turkish university. Specifically, the program offered the instructors four CPD activities to select from after analyzing previous semesters' feedback forms, conducting an extensive literature review, and consulting to the institution's CPD coordinators to determine the feasible CPD methods. Teacher trainer observation (TTO), peer observation (PO), self-reflection (SR), and teacher exchange (TE) were offered as alternative CPD activities. Data were collected from 123 instructors during the two terms when the system was implemented. Data analysis was conducted based on CPD documents of instructors' selected activities, thematic analysis of interviews regarding the implementation of the new system and the patterns found in the document analysis. The findings showcased SR was the most preferred activity during both semesters whereas TTO was not selected at all. Among those who completed a CPD activity in both semesters, about half of them tried out a new method while the other half selected the same method for both semesters. The thematic analysis provided insights into these patterns and instructors' perceptions towards the integration of autonomy into CPD activities.

Keywords: Continuous Professional Development, Accreditation, Teacher Autonomy

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Introduction

Continuing professional development (CPD) denoting organized opportunities and initiatives that teachers undertake to promote lifelong learning (Mansour et al., 2014; Sabah et al., 2014) has gained attention due to its great impact on teachers' professional growth in recent decades. With an emphasis on lifelong learning, it is conducive to an ongoing and contextually relevant process (Mansour et al., 2014). Therefore, it is regarded as vital for improving educational standards, as teachers must continuously update their knowledge and skills to enhance their teaching and students' learning experiences in educational contexts (Hargreaves & Fullan, 1992). In addition to adapting to change, teachers are expected to serve as role models for lifelong learning, demonstrating dedication and enthusiasm towards ongoing education, as their primary responsibility is to cultivate effective learning habits in their students (Day, 1999). Within this context, CPD activities are expected to provide significant opportunities for intellectual, social, and emotional engagement with concepts, resources, and peers, both within and beyond the realm of teaching for teachers (Little, 1993). These activities should take heed of the specific needs and requirements of the institution where they are carried out.

Writing self-reflections, attending to peer teaching/ observation/ supervision, having teacher trainer observations, joining in-service training/short-term courses/seminars/conferences/in-house training sessions, and providing mentoring for newly hired teachers have been some forms of CPD mentioned in the literature. With the increasing importance uttered to teaching English language owing to the profound impact of globalization in the 21st century, CPD has gained utmost vitality in the field of English language teaching. In parallel with this, institutions have required English teachers to continually update their knowledge and skills to foster their CPD and embrace lifelong learning to be able to keep up with the era. In addition to this, CPD mechanisms have been key parts of higher education institutions due to accreditation processes, which aim to enhance and maintain quality educational services. However, hitherto forms of CPD activities were not effective in every context and did not yield the best results to address teachers' needs. To illustrate, some studies showed that a significant portion of teachers were not open to having their peers visit their classrooms, and peer collaboration for staff development was seldom utilized (Lam, Yim, & Lam, 2002). What is more, other studies revealed that teachers are in need of exchanging new ideas through discussions with colleagues from their own and other schools as well as sharing best practices (ORC International, 2001). Such needs have led to a search for new forms of CPD to cater for the specific needs of institutions (e.g., Ülker & Kır, 2022).

As it has been illustrated in the literature, one size does not fit all. In other words, imposing one form of CPD may not yield desired outcomes, such as lifelong learning and keeping up with the newest pedagogies as explained above. For this reason, teacher autonomy-oriented CPD approaches might serve for varying needs of foreign language teaching staff. Gupta and Baveja (2014) defined teacher autonomy as “the ability to make their own decisions about what to do rather than being influenced by someone else or told what to do” (p. 162). Manzano Vazquez (2018) reported that the concept of teacher autonomy involves the extent to which teachers utilize their freedom for the purpose of their own professional development and their capacity to direct their professional learning processes. These definitions denote independence, self-sufficiency, self-government, and self-rule. It enables teachers to have the capability to develop professionally by engaging in self-directed professional growth, consistently improving their knowledge. Hargreaves (2003) cautioned that limited opportunities for teacher autonomy negatively influences teachers' efforts to assume

responsibility for their own work. Conversely, promoting teacher autonomy has been reported to lead to positive influences on students (Reeve & Cheon, 2016). Within an institution, teacher autonomy can be enacted through CPD activities. Such activities may focus on enhancing teachers' skills and readiness to enact changes, promoting self-awareness and accountability, encouraging active participation and collaboration, and establishing a supportive social network for professional growth in an attempt to foster teacher autonomy (Gupta & Baveja, 2014). In that sense, activities such as action research, self or peer observation, reading relevant literature, or attending conferences can be listed as some teacher autonomy fostering activities in CPD. However, the objective should not be to compel teachers into change, but rather to stimulate them to contemplate their practices through avenues such as group discussions and reflective exercises (Farrell, 2011). In addition, a key factor in achieving these goals is institutional support (Javadi, 2014; Hyslop-Margison & Sears, 2010). To put in another way, working conditions must also be conducive for autonomous professional learning activities.

Another important aspect of the context of this study is accreditation in higher education institutions. Accreditation is widely acknowledged as a crucial component of tertiary institutions, serving to uphold and sustain standards of achievement over the long run (Yüksel, 2013). Furthermore, it is a means to promote the professional development of teaching staff and assist teaching and learning (Spowart & Turner, 2021). Therefore, many programs in fields such as teacher training and intensive English education within higher education institutions worldwide, including those in Türkiye, seek accreditation to attain recognition on a global scale, aligning with the demands of globalization and contemporary standards. Accrediting bodies for intensive English programs typically emphasize instructor continuous professional development (CPD) as a key component of quality assurance. Consequently, accredited intensive English programs establish policies and employ strategies to enhance the professional growth of their instructors, thereby ensuring compliance with accreditation requirements (Kumar et al., 2020; Ülker & Bakioğlu, 2019).

Drawing from the literature on teacher autonomy and considering the quality benchmarks set forth by accrediting bodies, this study aims to investigate a newly implemented autonomy-guided CPD activity at the School of Foreign Languages of a state university in Türkiye. More specifically, the current study examined the types of CPD activities selected by the instructors and their perceptions of the new program. In this regard, the current research aims to answer the questions below:

1. How did the participation into the CPD activities change over the two semesters in terms of:
 - a. the number of instructors who completed an activity; and
 - b. the number of activities selected by the instructors?
2. What are the teachers' perceptions about the PD initiative based on teacher autonomy?

Methodology

Research Design

This longitudinal research followed a pure qualitative research approach for in-depth analysis of the phenomenon (Creswell, 2012). Also, the study adopted a case study methodology to yield deeper insights of the participants in a specific context.

Research Setting

This study was carried out at one of the top tier state universities of Türkiye. As this is an English medium instruction (EMI) university, the students join the English preparation school to meet eligibility criteria for English language proficiency before starting their departments. There are nearly 180 instructors employed in the School of Foreign Languages. The School of Foreign Languages holds accreditation from a respected international accrediting agency, having renewed its accreditation recently. To meet the standards set by this accrediting body and the staffing needs of the program, all CPD initiatives follow a structured analysis of instructors' needs and wants. In that sense, instructors are required to participate in at least one CPD activity throughout the term. In the previous years, instructors were offered a single type of CPD task and they were asked to complete it throughout the semester. Nonetheless, the results of instructor surveys indicated they were not satisfied with the CPD activities and could not sufficiently benefit from them in the sense of professional development. To remedy this problem and meet the accreditation CPD criteria, Professional Development Unit (PDU) launched a piloting study with analyze-apply-evaluate cycle to offer a context sensitive CPD activity for this School of Foreign Languages. The activity called Teacher Exchange was applied and found successful by the instructors (see Ülker & Kır, 2022). Following this CPD activity, PDU decided to encourage teacher autonomy among the instructors while initiating CPD activities. To that wake, the first trial of teacher autonomy on CPD activities started in the 2022-2023 Spring Term. It continued in the following 2023-2024 Fall Term. As part of the procedures, the instructors were presented with four different CPD activities to choose from, namely teacher trainer observation (TTO), peer observation (PO), self-reflection (SR) and teacher exchange (TE). The selection of the activities were in line with the contextual affordances as well as the literature as initiatives to foster teacher autonomy mostly involved reflection and making sense of their own practice (Manzano Vazquez, 2018). All the guidelines for each activity were prepared by the Professional Development Unit (PDU) and the administration under the purview of the accreditation requirements.

Data Collection and Analysis

Under the accreditation requirements, all instructors were required to participate in the CPD activities once in a term. For this reason, the data were obtained from files of English instructors teaching in the English Preparatory program under the umbrella of the School of Foreign Languages in addition to five instructors who participated in the semi-structured interviews in this study. In the first semester, 2022-2023 Spring Term, each instructor was required to choose only one CPD activity out of four activities and perform it in two months. Later, they needed to upload the files of the activity they conducted to their personal folders created by the PDU. Prior to the implementation, the process was explained in detail to all instructors with charts and documents. The same process was repeated in the 2023-2024 Fall Term. At the end of the second term when the autonomy-guided CPD circle was completed, all personal files were checked and analyzed. Later, semi-structured interviews were conducted with five instructors to evaluate the effectiveness of the application. Table 1 shows the research timeline.

Document analysis was utilized to answer the first research question. Document analysis is accepted as a qualitative research method and defined as a methodical approach to examining written materials, typically following predefined criteria or guidelines to ensure consistency and thoroughness in assessment (Bowen, 2009). In our study, the files uploaded by the

instructors were checked in order to obtain the number of activities selected in each semester. This way we were able to track the selected activities and their numbers for the first term and how these numbers changed in the following term.

Additionally, to delve into the instructors’ perspectives on the utilization of four kinds of CPD activities and the chance of integrating their own autonomy in selecting their own CPD activity, semi-structured interviews were conducted with five randomly selected instructors. The interview protocol included five questions in total and the questions were prepared by the researchers and checked by an expert. For the interview data, thematic analysis was carried out by following the steps of Braun and Clarke (2006). Pseudonyms were used for interview participants to ensure anonymity.

Steps	Instrument	Time
Present situation analysis	Feedback surveys	2021-2022 Spring
Design and development of PD activities	Literature review	2022-2023 Fall
Implementation	PD activity documents	2022-2023 Spring 2023-2024 Fall
Evaluation	Document analysis Open-ended questionnaires	2023-2024 Spring

Table 1: The procedures of the autonomy-guided CPD cycle and data collection

Findings

The document analysis revealed how instructors’ participation in CPD activities changed over two semesters, what kind of activities were popular among the instructors and what CPD activity was favored the most. Also, the thematic analysis of interview results reflecting the perceptions of five instructors demonstrated three main themes: a) Rationale for activity selection, b) Contribution to teacher autonomy, and c) Suggestions for future PD activities. Figure 1 shows the themes with sub themes.

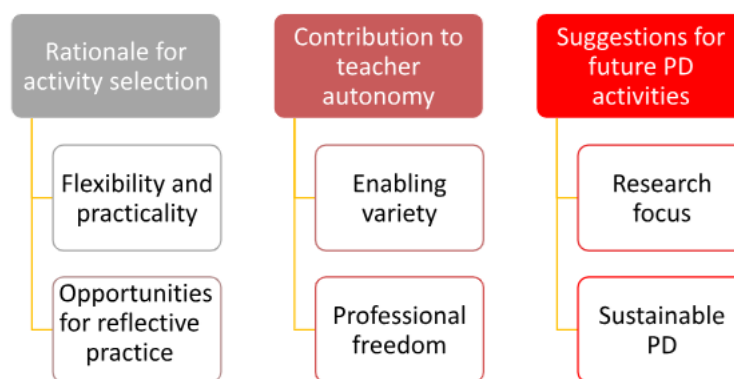


Figure 1: The qualitative findings at a glance

Tracking CPD Participation Across Two Semesters

The Number of Instructors Who Completed an Activity. In the first semester when the autonomy-guided CPD program started, a total of 69 instructors completed one CPD activity. This number increased to 76 in the second semester. Twenty-seven instructors selected the same activity in both semesters while 26 instructors had different preferences.

The Number of Activities Selected by the Instructors. During the first semester, the most popular activity became SR, which was completed by 46 instructors. It was followed by the TE with 12 instructors having completed it. The activity that came third was PO whereas TTO was not selected at all.

The second semester followed a similar trend as SR became the most-widely selected activity (43 instructors) and it was again followed by PO (26 instructors) and TE (4 instructors). TTO was not preferred in the second semester of the program either.

Instructor Perceptions

The thematic analysis revealed three broader themes regarding the perceptions of five instructors on the autonomy-guided CPD system in the institution: The rationale for the activity selection, contribution to teacher autonomy and suggestions for future PD activities.

The Rationale for Activity Selection. Semi-structured interviews conducted with five instructors revealed the rationale of selecting particular activities as flexibility, practicality and opportunities for reflective practice as four of them opted for SR and one of them chose peer observation.

Flexibility and practicality was emphasized by the selection of SR as it did not involve another colleague and paved the way for total freedom to conduct the activity. Gizem and Nil's statements illustrated this point:

I might not find a teacher to come and observe me in the class, and I mean in terms of feedback and I can video record myself and give myself feedback on my own teaching. (Gizem)

I conducted self-reflection activity first and peer observation later. I wanted to see what might have gone unnoticed in my teaching. This new system allowed me to be flexible. (Nil)

Practicality was another aspect of activity selection according to Burak and Sevinç as they explained:

First of all, it's practical. When you reflect back, you realize any mistake you might have made. You can improve your practice. You don't get tense as you do when somebody else is watching your class. That's why I think it works. (Burak)

I can easily fit it in my timetable. (Sevinç)

Opportunities to reflect on one's own teaching was also mentioned by the interview participants.

You don't always get to stop and reflect on your own lesson. So, it was useful. (Feyza)

I took my video and then wrote my reflection. I realized lots of things. (Sevinç)

[During the peer observation] he noticed several aspects regarding the classroom dynamics, which was especially nice. He pointed out things that I hadn't previously noticed about that particular classroom and helped me improve the activity. (Nil)

Contribution to Teacher Autonomy. The participants referred to the new system's contribution to their autonomy as well. They said the CPD initiative enabled variety and promoted professional freedom. The first aspect was highlighted by all instructors as they compared the current system with the earlier PD initiatives, which heavily relied on lesson observations. Burak and Nil's statements were illustrative of this situation:

It was not good earlier. There were no options. It was especially tough for more experienced teachers. They believed it was ridiculous for them to be observed by other teachers who were less experienced. Now everybody has something suitable for themselves. (Burak)

Too much lately so that I can decide on my own whether I want that variety or not. Then I do. It is nice. It is nice not having to do one single type. (Nil)

Furthermore, having different options helped the instructors to exert their agency on their own PD and gave them professional freedom. Rather than top-down implementation of staff development activities in the institution, a bottom-up approach in the new CPD system, in which the instructors were driven to initiate the process, was more favorable.

Leaving it to the teachers, what is best for them, is definitely better. (Feyza)

We are trying to make the learners autonomous and independent. We should also have the autonomy to choose from lots of options. It is the best policy ever. (Sevinç)

Currently, it depends on a teacher's dedication if one wants to do this properly. Let's say I might not find a teacher to come and observe me in the class to get feedback. Then I can video record myself and reflect on my own teaching or I can ask PDU to come and make some comments on my teaching. (Gizem)

If CPD is a must, what matters is how much a teacher has learned. Has the PD activity taught the teacher anything? That's the question and it can happen through some autonomy. (Feyza)

Suggestions for Future PD Activities. Three of the interview participants also made suggestions to further diversify the pool of activities to choose from with two ideas coming to the fore: research-focused activities and other CPD activities that are more sustainable and span over a longer period of time. Nil suggested conducting research would be challenging to achieve, yet it could provide further opportunities for professional learning.

We do have a lot of instructors who work on their PhD or MA so they would maybe be willing to participate in such a thing, why not? They can submit their studies as proof of their PD activities. If the other teachers are not interested in doing that, don't make them do that. (Nil)

In addition, more sustainable forms of CPD were suggested by two other instructors. Their suggestions contrasted with shorter-lasting activities such as observations or writing self-

reflection reports. While Sevinç suggested keeping journals, Gizem offered it would be beneficial to do some follow-up work following teacher training events. She also explained in-house events could be held during which instructors can prepare and present useful teaching methods they have applied in their own classrooms. She further proposed that the institution can seek discounts from other teacher training institutions so that she and her colleagues can earn credentials as part of their CPD activities.

Discussion and Conclusion

The findings of this research contributed to the understanding of promoting practitioner autonomy in higher education institutions. Reporting on the CPD activity selection of 69 instructors during the first semester and 76 instructors during the second semester of the implementation, the current study found that writing SR reports was the most popular activity for CPD. The semi-structured interviews revealed it was due to the flexibility SR provided. The qualitative data analysis also indicated that the autonomy-guided program promoted teacher agency as it facilitated a bottom-up approach to CPD and enabled a variety of activities. Suggestions from two interview participants demonstrated more activities could be added to the program. Arguably these activities would be suitable for those instructors who sought more sustainable and challenging forms of CPD as the suggestions were conducting action research or obtaining credentials from recognized teacher training organizations (e.g. CELTA, DELTA certificates). The fact that TTO's were not selected in either semester may deserve attention, too. In the context, this traditional form of CPD was the most familiar, however, the analysis of two semester's data as well as the semi-structured interviews attested to its inefficiency and negative appraisal by the instructors. Therefore, it could be proposed that the higher education institution needed more flexible varieties that suit the needs and preferences such as self-observation and writing self-reflection reports or writing journals (as suggested by one of the interview participants).

This study had several limitations, too. First of all, the selections were tracked through the documents uploaded by each instructor and the trends were reported in this study. In order to complete the CPD cycle, a more thorough tracking system could be established to help instructors exploit the system in the most beneficial way possible. Similarly, additional data collection from administration and the PD unit could have yielded further practical implications about how the new system impacted overall quality processes of the school. Finally, comparative studies could be conducted to provide more insight into various aspects of this CPD system. Such studies would also allow to fine-tune the idea of autonomy-guided CPD in higher education institutions.

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