

**ASSESSING THE PERCEPTION AND PRACTICE OF INDEPENDENT PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT
(IPD) IN EFL CONTEXT**

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ABSTRACT

Understanding the theoretical and practical aspects of teachers' professional development paves the way for achieving sustainable socioeconomic development in general and improving the quality of education in particular. This study assessed the perception and practice of Independent Professional Development (IPD) in the context of foreign language teaching. Both questionnaire and interview were used for collecting data from fifty one teachers of English language at secondary schools. The data were analyzed descriptively and thematically. The findings showed considerable level of understanding about the self driven professional improvement while there were inconsistencies and mismatch between their perceptions and practical experiences at schools. Mistreatment, poor collaboration and little encouragement systems of schools as well as inaccessible learning resources seemed to create pressure on the teachers' practices of self driven improvement of their teaching profession.

Keywords: EFL/ESL Teacher, Independent Professional Development, Second/Foreign Language Teacher Education, Teacher Professionalism, Teachers' Perceptions, Sustainable Professional Development

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

Ensuring quality education reinforces teachers' professional development that could facilitate the efforts governments engage in for bringing about overall sustainable socioeconomic development. Nowadays, second/foreign teachers' professional development tends to shift its focus from more formal and traditional form of inculcating theoretical assumptions and principles of language learning and teaching into a flexible and personally driven process of constructing self teaching and learning theories of second/foreign language. Educating teachers on second language teaching learning principles for potential application in classroom instructions has not been found effective in bringing about the desired changes of teachers' teaching competence and performance that have largely been determined by their personal beliefs and attitudes (Borg,2003,Freeman, 2002;Freeman& Johnson, 1998;Johnson& Golombek,2003). Johnson (2006) emphasizes the need for second language teachers' skills of reflective teaching that could help them manage the changing conditions of learning to teach.

According to Smith (2000), promoting teachers' independence in professional development has to be emphasized for not only teacher learning is more of a self driven process but also learners' autonomy could largely be affected by teachers' autonomy through which every effort being done for changing the societal living conditions relies on. A teacher could be considered as professionally independent when he/she becomes both a professional teacher and a lifelong professional learner (Barfield et al, 2002). Darling-Hammond and Bransford (2005:359) also contend that teacher education should prepare the ground for continuous professional growth, i.e., "helping teachers become professionals who are adaptive experts". Adaptive experts, they noted, are those teachers who are able to balance efficiency and innovation. That is, the teaching professionals with the skills and capacity of planning, implementing and monitoring learning activities based on the dynamics of classroom teaching and learning. Generally, Johnson (2006:7) characterizes second language teachers' professional development as "normative and lifelong, as emerging out of and through experiences in social contexts: as learners in classrooms, and schools, as participants in professional teacher education programs, and later as teachers in the settings where they work". Here the need for teachers' self learning has become one area of focus in teacher professional development in particular and sustain socioeconomic development endeavors in general.

Teachers' Independent Professional Development (IPD)is usually associated with teacher autonomy in general and it is also referred to as autonomous professional learning(Jing, 2007), self-directed professional development (Yan, 2010),self-initiated professional development(Guskey, 2000; Richards and Farrell, 2005; Smith, 2001). Different scholars consider teachers' IPD in three perspectives such as teachers' willingness of independent learning, their capacity of self-learning and freedom of choosing and making use of professional learning opportunities(Jing, 2007; Smith, 2003; Yan, 2010).This division also implies that teachers' effectiveness in involving and making progress in their own professional improvement has been, determined, in one way or the other, by their interest, ability and sense of freedom from external controlling environment. As authors note, late alone maintaining such EFL teachers' professional development momentum, governments usually need societies' develop their sense of ownership in learning or changing things for sustainable social development.

According to Iida (2009) professional development activities such as action research, self-observation and peer observation are usually designed for promoting independence of teachers' personal improvement in teaching where professionalism maintains significant magnitude to the sustainable socioeconomic development. Action research helps teachers sensitize their

instructional difficulties and assess possibilities of solving such problems with monitoring and follow up skills. Self-observation also creates space for teachers to look into themselves for identifying failures and good lessons out their instructional practices. Professional interaction, cooperation and collaboration skills could also be developed with peer observation. For example, Sengupta and Nicholson's (1996) study on the role of TeleTeach (focuses on providing electronic materials for reflective teaching) for online and ongoing professional development, considerable link has been observed between self improvement and provision of professional learning materials. In other words, with access of learning resources teachers could become more competent in managing teaching and learning process. An EFL teacher in South Korea was also reported in using her own writing lessons observations as means of promoting her effectiveness in teaching writing (Richards and Farrell, 2005). The authors also mentioned positive results of teacher support groups by EFL teacher in Seoul, South Korea for professional development. Besides, keeping journal writing for developing aspects of teaching techniques by an EFL teacher in Japan and another EFL teacher in Thailand were observed.

Based on English teachers' professional development needs and contexts various forms professional development activities including peer coaching, study groups, dialogue journals, professional development portfolios, mentoring and participatory practitioner research have also been used in united states (Diaz-Maggioli, 2003 as cited in Dayoub & Bashiruddin, 2012). In such professional development, the role of teachers' involvement becomes significant, and more self-initiative efforts and emotional attachment are required for sustained professional improvement practices. In Golombek and Johnson's (2004) study as cited in Dayoub & Bashiruddin(2012) teachers' conception and emotions were found to be a key role for promoting involvement and commitment of teachers in professional development endeavors mainly using journals, peers and theoretical knowledge of teaching.

Second/foreign language teachers, however, usually face some kind of challenges and opportunities when they try to improve their profession on personal basis. For example, in Yuan and Lee's (2014) action research, teachers at schools faced contextual challenges like time constraints, poor staff cooperation and rigid schedule during conducting the research being coached by university professors. Despite, such hurdles, the teachers experienced importance lessons for personal and professional development. Given the effective role of IPD for teachers to bring about the required professional competence of the intended learning outcomes, a lot has not been done on teachers' perception of IPD and their practical experiences of self learning for professional improvement. Why teachers do involve and not to in IPD activities could be related to their perceptions of IPD.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

This study sought to address EFL teachers' perceptions and experiences of IPD activities. More specifically, three research questions were posed:

1. How do high school EFL teachers perceive IPD?
2. To what extent do the teachers practice IPD activities at schools?
3. What challenges EFL teachers face in implementing IPD activities?

METHODOLOGY

The study was conducted at Bahir Dar University which was first established as teachers' college of education in 1973. Before upgrading itself to a university in 2000, the college has produced a number of teachers for primary and secondary schools with the required level of professional knowledge and skills for effective teaching and learning process. Developing teachers' professional capacity has still been one of the areas the university concerned for improving the deteriorated education quality noted by different research reports (e.g., Tekeste, 2006). Thus, hundreds of EFL teachers are attending the university's summer program (runs for two months, July to August) for earning a second degree in ELT. The courses focus on theoretical issues of second/foreign language acquisition, language teaching approaches, language testing and others courses related to curriculum design and preparation. The student teachers are assumed to learn a lot about language pedagogies and implement them in their teaching at schools. Nevertheless, how the school contexts could contribute to the teachers' professional learning before joining the University for up grading has been given little attention in the educational system of the present research context. Therefore, assessing student teachers' conception and experience of self learning at their work places seemed to be imperative, and this study became a further analysis and examination of my previous piece of work on self-initiated professional development. This study also considered fifty-two EFL teachers from different high schools.

The selection of teachers was based on the convenience of the researcher in that during the application of student teachers for second degree in ELT to Bahir Dar University, I approached them individually with their full consent for data informants. Of the sixty-five teachers received the questionnaire on IPD, fifty-two returned filled in. Three teachers were chosen for further interview questions based on their willingness to spend some hours for the study. The teachers (8 females and 44 males) had five to twenty-five teaching experiences at different school levels - primary (1-6 grades), junior secondary (6-7 grades) and secondary schools (9-12 grades).

Instruments

Questionnaire and interview were used for data collection. The questionnaire was developed from the researchers' experience of professional development and literature reviews on independent professional development (e.g., Bailey, Curtis, and Nunan (2002). 'Pursuing Professional Development: The Self as 'Source', and Richards and Farrell (2005)'Professional Development for Language Teachers: Strategies for Teacher Learning'). The questionnaire was also developed in the form of closed ended and likert scale response items (strongly Agree, 5; Agree, 4 ; Neutral, 3; Disagree, 2; Strongly Disagree, 1) with two parts. The first part includes items of background information and the second consists of items on perceptions and practical experiences of IPD. For example, the importance of self driven professional improvements, the possibility of practicing independent professional learning at work place and the significant role of personally motivated actions for real change in professional practices were some of the areas that the questionnaire and interview items addressed. Minor modifications, mainly on language clarity, were made after pilot testing with fifteen teachers who were already enrolled in the University for the same program. Thus, the calculated reliability coefficient of chron bach alpha was 0.77 and this value could be accepted for administration.

Procedures of data analysis

The questionnaire data were first collected from individual teachers within two days. All of the participant teachers received the questionnaire to fill it within an hour though majority of them returned the filled in questionnaire two days later. The data were analyzed in the form of descriptive statistics to see the level of awareness and practices of IPD. Data presentation for the teachers' mean response was done in the form of figures that depict mean numbers of agreement or disagreement. The unstructured interview data collected from the three teachers who spent fifty to fifty minutes of discussion with me. I appointed each interviewee in my office with their convenient time and I spent about three hours with all interviewees. Considerable time was also spent for transcribing the audio recorded data into written form and reading it in order to identify common issues emerged out of the three teachers' interviewed data. The interview data were presented in intermingled with the survey data based on the sequence of research questions. A few quotations from interview data were also discussed in the data analysis section for highlighting live responses of the participants

RESULTS

The findings of this study presented in the form of figures. Figure one shows the teachers' perception about IPD. The second presents the practices of IPD as teachers reported. The last figure, but not least, describes factors affecting teachers' implementation of IPD. Major findings from interviews are also presented in a narration form following the figures of the questionnaire data.

The teachers' mean response to their perceptions towards IPD, as shown in figure 1, appears to be positive and acknowledging. Considerable degree of agreement is seen on each item.

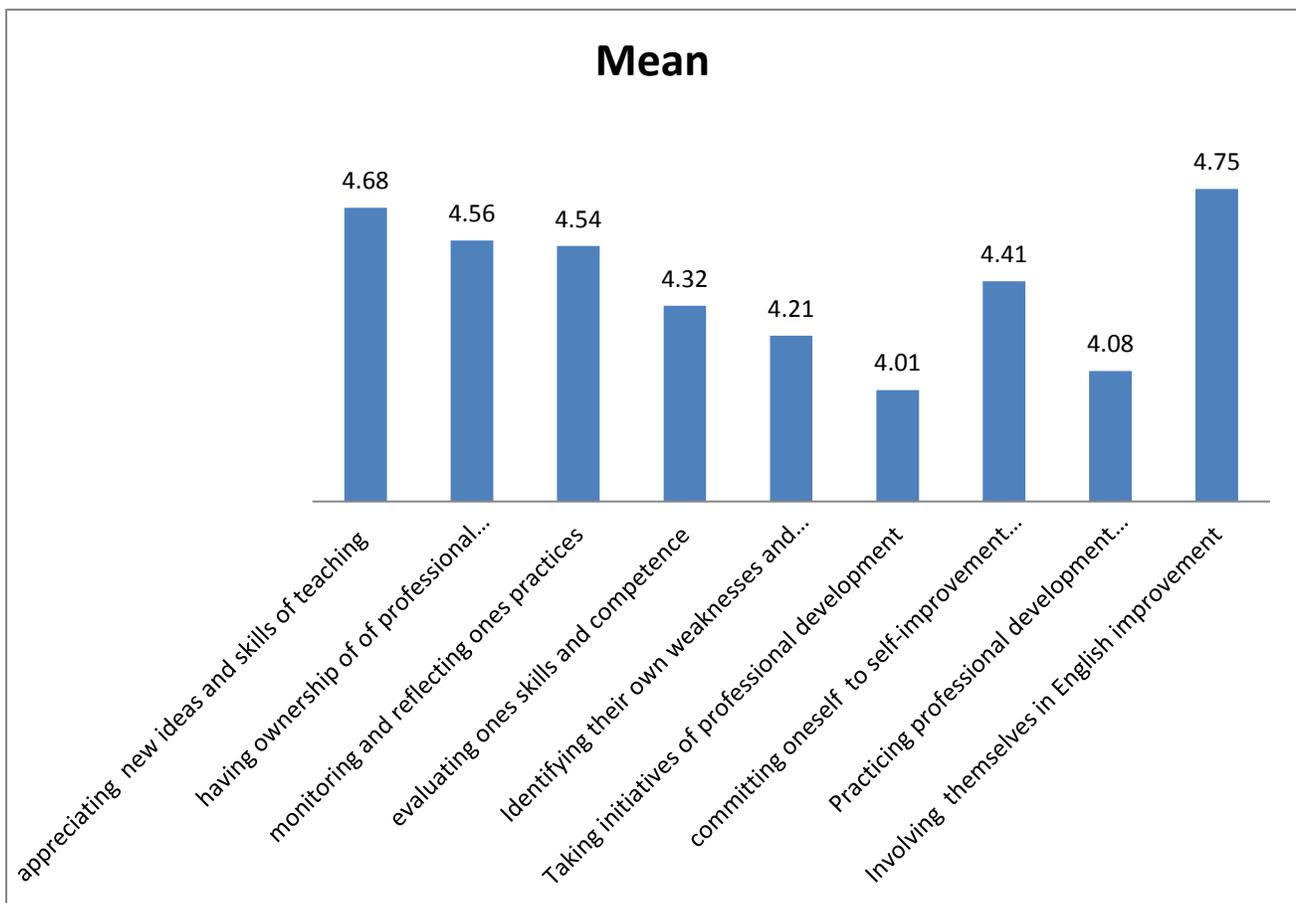


Figure 1. Teachers' perceptions about IPD

In other words, the data clearly indicates the respondents' agreement to the need for practicing IPD activities and opportunities for adding more professional capacity for their day to instructional duty. For example, the teachers highly recognized the importance of: involving themselves in English improvement, incorporating new ideas and skills of teaching, and having ownership of the professional improvement (mean 4.75, 4.68 & 4.56 respectively). Such understanding about the significant role of IPD for achieving higher professional competence could be considered as a valuable ground for practicing different tasks and activities of self professional improvement.

The respondents in the interview session also showed positive awareness on the relevance of making professional development endeavors on self initiated basis. One interviewee states:

You see, people (teachers) are busy with different teaching related activities like planning lessons, preparing tests, giving feedback and so on, and these activities could also be sources of self professional learning. They can evaluate their effectiveness ,whether they are helping students learn well or not; If not, the teachers should create their innovative power for improving the learning and teaching activities. So, all of such efforts are essential for our professional growth. (interviewee 1, 2016)

The teacher tends to relate professional activities in their usual teaching and learning process with opportunities of self-improvement where the survey results reflected significantly. Generally, the teachers interviewed expressed their positive feelings towards employing self-initiated professional development, and they noted that encouragement and high degree of focus have to be given to IPD. The teachers, even, reminded that some kind of incentives and modes of appraisal (e.g. salary increment and letter of acknowledgement) should be given to those who succeeded in achieving the required level of professional capacity through self driven efforts. The second interviewee noted the following:

Mostly, on the part of the teachers the so called self study or self-initiated improvement...em is absent. For example, in our school's CPD (continuous Professional Development) program we are required to discuss some issues of teaching English, but we do not do it. We do not have such experience of working together for professional development. I think, this is may be because of lack of interest. So, mostly I do not see teachers involve in personally driven English improvement activities. Of course, I do not mean that we teachers undermine the role of independent learning for improving our English proficiency and teaching skills. This is a great job. The point is,teachers usually expect some sort of incentives out of professional development activities. They want to make some kind of advantage though such self-initiated professional development, as you know, has no incentives to be given by external bodies. Therefore, when you do not have somebody who encourages you, you may think that 'what is the point of improving my professional skills and competence for the sake of professional development, unless I can get something important out of it'. (interviewee 2, 2016)

As the survey and interview data indicated, IPD seems to be acknowledged by the teachers though some concerns were raised by interviewees for implementing it.

The teachers' responses to their IPD practices, as seen in figure two, do not seem to correspond to their level of perception. Only a few professional development practices were reported as merely implemented during their professional life.

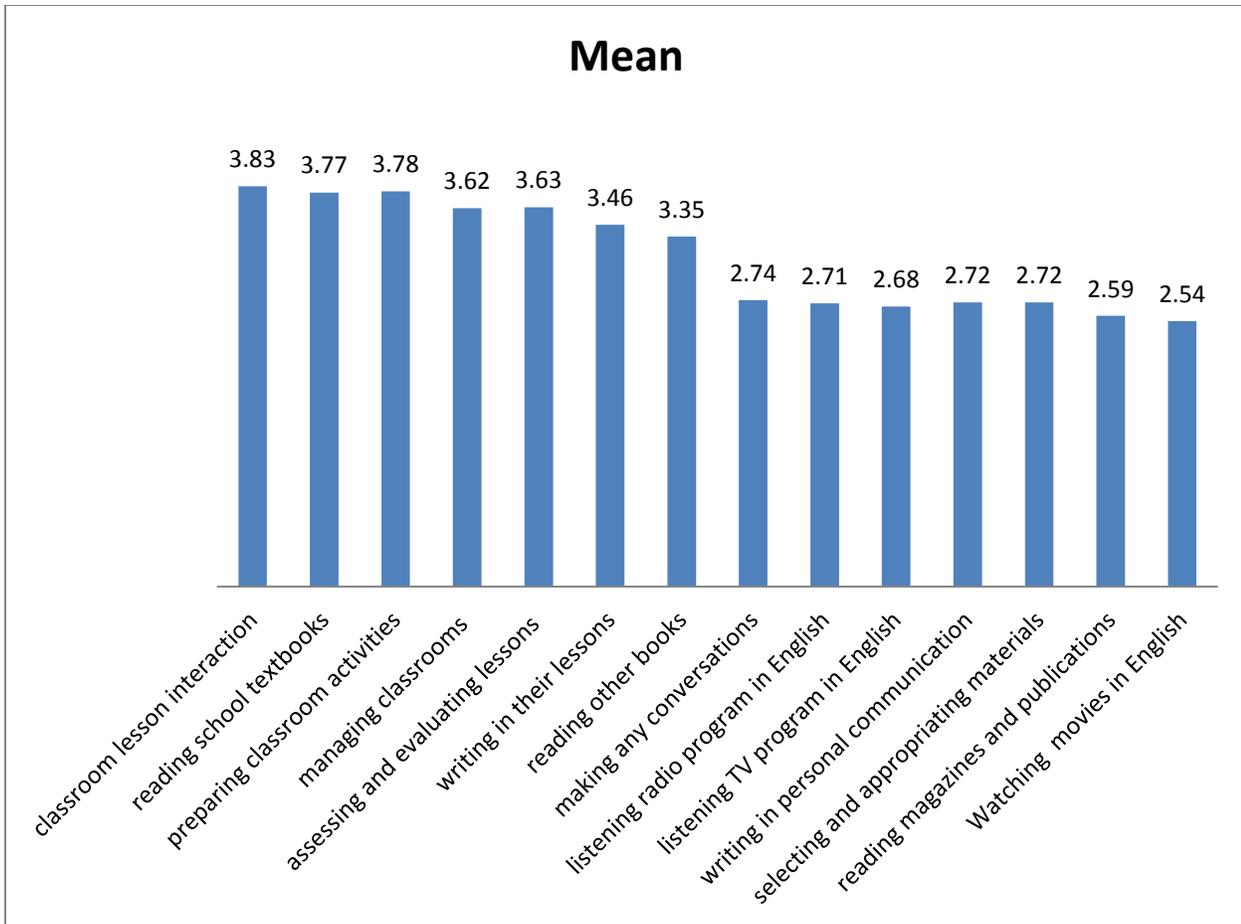


Figure 2. Teachers' Practices of IPD

According to the figure 2 above, the teachers reported of having frequent practices of a few self driven professional development activities like interacting in classroom lessons, preparing classroom activities, assessing and evaluating lessons, and managing classrooms (Mean-3.83, 3.78, 3.77, 3.63&3.62 respectively). Nevertheless, majority of professional development activities were reported not being practiced significantly. This could imply that the teachers' practical experience tends to be minimal though considerable degree of acknowledgement was reflected on the role of IPD.

On the other hand, the interview data showed that the teachers considered the professional duties such as lesson planning, preparation for delivering and classroom management as part of IPD activities. For example, one interviewee noted:

During classroom teaching, I have the opportunity to speak more as giving instructions and managing classrooms. This I think could improve my speech as well as professional competence. Lesson planning is my routine work. You know I have seen significant improvements on my lesson planning skills. (interviewee 2, 2016)

In other words, the teachers themselves did consider those activities as their routine work though they associated the activities as a form of self learning. Therefore, identifying the purpose and roles of each routine activity in work places would be needed for minimizing such perception ambiguity. Why do really teachers talk more in their classrooms, is it for self speaking proficiency or for instruction purpose? This has to be identified. The interviewed teachers did not have clear purpose in this regard:

For example, there are no as such active and responsive students to my instructions at the school. I usually say every direction and instruction in the classroom loudly with extended explanations. Of course, this helped me improve my speaking. Even, sometimes, I asked myself if I was not given such opportunity in making a speech like this, how would I develop my speaking.(Interviewee 1, 2016)

On the other hand, the results in the figure indicate more activities of the professional development (such as reading other books, magazines and publications; conversations with colleagues, listening to radio and watching movies) with minimal degree of practice of the teachers' actual self-training packages. Therefore, generally there seems to have some form of mismatch between the perceptions the teachers hold about IPD and the practical experiences they reported.

Of course, the interviewed teachers' responded a little bit differently in that all of them felt that they frequently practiced the self-development activities such as collegial sharing of ideas, reading different materials, participating in school language clubs and other related engagements. The interview data did not seem to confirm the survey responses. There seems to have some form of contradiction and inconsistency between the teachers' responses of the closed-ended questionnaire and the interview responses. That is, the teachers' responses to most of the closed-ended items revealed insignificant practices of the professional development activities, where as the teachers' response to the interview revealed their making use of professional development activities. Generally, given such inconsistent responses, the teachers' positive orientation of the IPD did not seem to be applied in their day-to-day professional work. That is, the teachers did not appear to make use of the self-professional development tasks and activities that they were felt important for their professional skills and competencies.

Minimum challenges were noted, as figure three indicated, for involving in self based professional improvement activities.

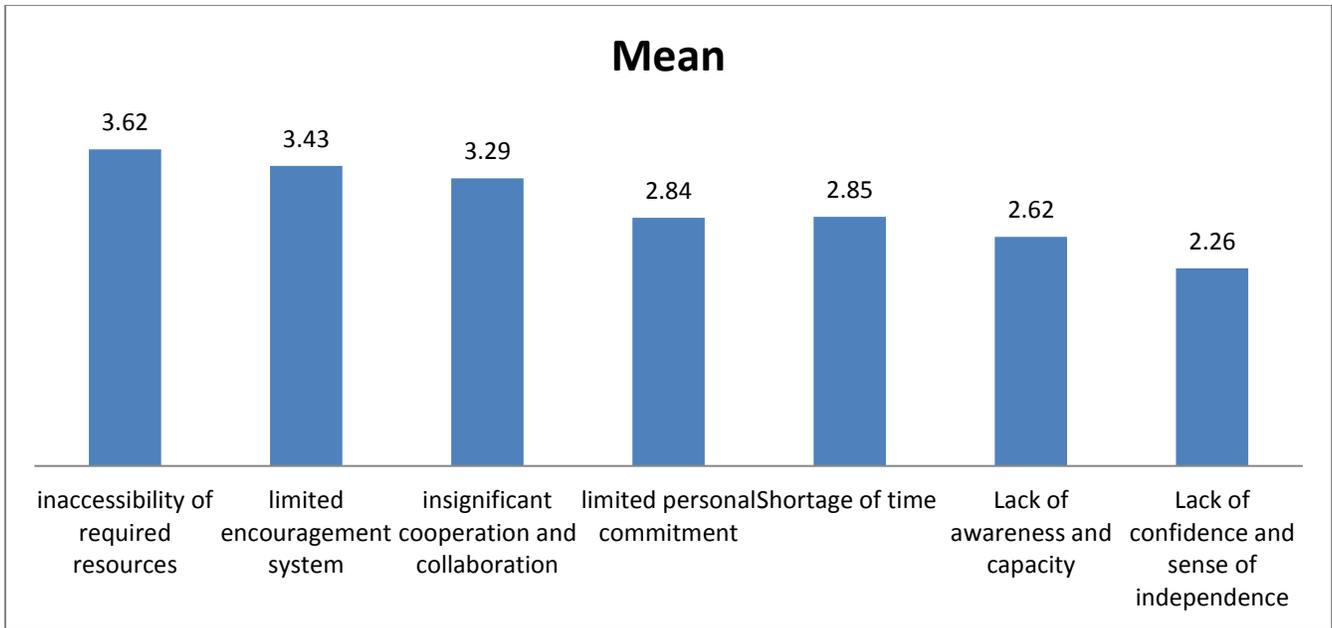


Figure 3. Difficulties of Practicing IPD

The teachers' mean responses to the possible factors hindering them from practicing IPD activities are not significant. The teachers considered only one challenge i.e., lack of access to required resources (Mean, 3.62) that put pressure on practicing IPD.

Though there were insignificant attempts of involving in IPD, as the survey result showed, the teachers did not seem to acknowledge more factors that hinder their IPD practices in the working places. For example, problems such as lack of commitment, awareness and capacity, self-confidence and shortage of time are not considered as obstacles of their self-driven professional development practices. The teachers, thus, seem to emphasize only on their schools' limited resources provision for conducting professional development activities.

The teachers, in their interview sessions, indeed, showed similar concerns in that the existing professional learning materials and school management system created serious challenges for learning from their own efforts and experiences. They mainly noted three major factors such as discouraging administrative and performance evaluation system, inaccessible learning resources, and negative cultural perceptions and collegial interaction of using English for social communications. One interviewee noted the following:

Of different hindrances, for example...em when you want to learn something you cannot afford financially; that is one problem. The second challenge, in the school we are busy with preparation for lessons, evaluation of students' work and managing social issues; you cannot manage these things if you like to engage with self-learning tasks. These things I think need more efforts and time...By the way when I think of my language capacity, I do not feel confident; I want to master the language well. Even, selecting and preparing teaching materials other than depending on the given textbook is my interest to do. But, as I said earlier, the

resource constraints, time problem and limited personal commitment I think created more pressure on me.

(Interviewee 2, 2016)

In order to engage with self study for professional development, as the interviewee stated, became difficult for time and resource problems although little effort and commitment might have been exerted on the part of teachers. Surprisingly, the interviewee was aware of his own professional development needs (like language command and material development skills); however, little effort for improvement has been noted.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This study results revealed more awareness on the teachers about the role of IPD for bringing significant difference on EFL teachers' professionalism. The teachers' considerable level of awareness would facilitate sustainable socioeconomic development given that effective practice of professionalism is undertaken. The teachers tended to acknowledge independent teacher learning process for professional improvement during their day to day work. For instance, the teachers highly rated the importance of updating themselves in their profession, conducting self-evaluation and colleague based reflections for effective professional growth that enables teachers direct and manage classroom instructional activities for helping students achieve the intended objectives of teaching (see Figure 1). Such positive perceptions of IPD did not seem to be practiced in the teachers' actual professional career. As the self-reported practices of IPD data show, the teachers were not able to realize their positive perception of self learning at schools where they undertake their teaching. The teachers, of course, noted a few school related factors such as little support in resources as well as other incentive mechanisms for justifying inconsistencies between their perceptions and practices of IPD. Despite the existing contextual factors influencing the self-driven professional improvement practices, teachers seemed to be advised to invest more energy and motivation if the IPD has to be realized in the day to day professional duty where holistic form of societal change may be needed for sustainable development. According to Guskey(2000), independent professional development by its own nature demands teachers to be self driven and highly committed regardless of the assistance and encouragement deficiencies from schools and other external agents.

This finding confirms other studies' results. For example, a study in Gaza at elementary school English teachers (Herzallah, 2011), showed that money and other forms of incentives (e.g., job promotion, complements and reward)had considerable influence on proper implementation of self-initiated professional development. Similarly, Ahmed's (2003) survey on secondary school EFL teachers' professional development revealed financial constraint as a major problem for employing personal based professional development activities in their schools. Cheng and Wang's (2004) study on the challenges on EFL teachers' professional development in summer upgrading program, also indicates a centrally based examination education system exerted significant impact on their professional development. Despite such the implementation difficulties teachers face in IPD, considerable results of professional improvement have also been reported. For instance, attending conferences as professional development has been recognized as having positive effects on teachers' professional confidence and performance (Borg, 2015).Nishino's (2012) study on teacher learning from collegial interaction as described as Community of Practice (CoP) also showed considerable professional improvement on the participant's day to day instructional techniques.

Generally, this study seems to shade light on two points. First, professional development for foreign language teachers has been redefined as not only a formalized institutional base of education process but also a personally initiated, goal oriented activities

which were considered as one part of their career, and such conception of teachers about professionalism would facilitate the quality of education in general and the social cultural development of societies in particular. Secondly, observing practical experience of IPD has become more demanding for teachers themselves as there would be serious concerns of commitment and capacity and working contexts that resource availability and rewarding mechanisms. Therefore, IPD is becoming a promising area of professionalism not only because of the change in education interface in terms of computer and communication technology, but also because teachers would like to involve and do it despite personal effort and commitment are required for.

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