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SPECIAL ISSUE INTRODUCTION



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## Introduction: Online Teacher Education and Professional Development in TESOL

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### ABSTRACT

Seven articles in this issue address teachers' beliefs and experiences with on-line professional development, the affordances offered by self-directed PD, the interactional processes that take place during on-line discussion groups, the changes in professional knowledge that group interaction can facilitate, the role of teacher reflection, the delivery of a course in on-line format, and challenges teachers face in switching to in-line instruction.

**Keywords:** on-line professional development; teacher reflection; teacher cognition; on-line interaction; on-line instruction

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## Background

Teacher professional development in language teaching refers to growth in teachers' understanding of the knowledge base of language teaching and second language learning, of themselves as teachers and their own teaching practices, and to both as a basis for reflection, review, and change. It can also serve to socialize teachers into the professional thinking and methods of the community of practice made up of other language teaching professionals. Professional development builds on the knowledge base and skills teachers may have acquired through experience and their initial teacher training opportunities and then develops it through a range of professional development activities. Teacher professional development (PD) can serve the needs of different stakeholders in language teaching. One is the teachers' institution, which can benefit from the increased commitment to teaching that PD can provide for teachers leading to a better institutional performance as well as a better reputation for the school. For the individual teacher it can facilitate personal career development as well as increase their sense of agency, empowerment, and autonomy. For learners, it can result in opportunities to experience more creative and relevant learning opportunities and hence lead to better learning outcomes. Professional development is thus directed toward the institution's goals and the teacher's own personal goals.

Traditional forms of teacher professional development include both formal and informal PD activities. These include attending seminars, workshops and conferences, taking a taught course to update professional knowledge and to acquire a qualification in a specific area such as language assessment, reading journal articles and professional magazines, participating in a reading group or discussion group, and participating in classroom research and action research. The current pandemic however has led to an increased interest in a use of on-line forms of professional development that are available to many teachers, such as through webinars, on-line communities, Instagram, social media, YouTube, blog, as well as on-line courses and lessons (e.g., MOOCs). The goal of this special issue of the *Iranian Journal of Language Teaching Research* was to provide accounts of different approaches to on-line professional development for language teachers, of the issues raised through on-line PD, and to obtain perspectives on good practice in on-line PD for language teachers. Thus the contributors were invited to address current issues and practices with on-line PD in TESOL teacher education. These include questions such as these:

What are the goals of teachers who take part in on-line PD?

What new knowledge and skills do teacher educators need to acquire in order to effectively deliver on-line professional development?

What kinds of on-line PD activities do language teachers make use of?

What affordances are provided by on-line PD resources?

What are the benefits and limitations of on-line PD?

What are teachers' and learners' views of the effectiveness of these activities?

What is the nature and role of on-learning communities for EFL/ESL teachers?

How can institutions provide support for on-line PD for their teachers?

The following brief overview of this issue will highlight how some of the above issues were addressed either directly or indirectly in the authors' contributions.

### Papers in the Special Issue

Some of the issues above are raised in the first paper in the issue - a study by Sadeghi and Navaei - *Iranian EFL Teachers' Experiences with Online Professional Development: Perceptions and Preferences*. The paper reports on a survey of Iranian EFL teachers' beliefs and experiences with on-line PD based on a questionnaire survey of 105 teachers who teach in both public and private institutions in Iran. As with any form of PD, teachers' attitudes and experience with PD will be influenced by a variety of institutional and personal factors, including their professional education and experience, their teaching context, their perceived needs, their professional development goals, their learning style preferences, the logistics involved in participating in on-line learning, the teachers' needs and level of commitment to PD, the level of complexity of the activity and the linguistic demands it makes for participants, the type of interaction and communication involved and the level of support available to teachers for participation in PD. For example, watching a webinar on ways of motivating a classroom of teenage learners is a less cognitively demanding activity than taking part in an on-line discussion group on the application of systemic linguistics to the teaching of writing. And watching an on-line lecture on alternative assessment may be less demanding than reading a book chapter on the same topic, since during the lecture the instructor may interact with the audience to assist understanding and make use of a variety of visual and other resource to clarify meaning.

In Sadeghi and Navaei's survey, the majority of teachers reported having no experience with on-line PD. Those with experience of on-line PD reported a wide range of topics they had studied, such as leadership, motivation, and teaching the skills, though it is not clear how or at what level such topics was treated, the kind of participation required of the teachers, and whether there was any assessment of their on-line PD experience. Those who reported positive experience with PD commented on its potential benefit to their careers and its convenience, while for some it was an option when no other PD options were available. However, many reported limited opportunities for the uptake of what they learned from the PD. Although reflecting the limitations of questionnaire-based data the study serves as a useful backdrop from which to develop further in-depth studies of on-line PD, excellent examples of which are provided in the next three papers.

Sezgin Ballıdağ and Kenan Dikilitaş' fascinating paper- *Preparatory School Teachers' Self-Directed Online Professional Development* – presents case studies of the on-line PD experiences of three English teachers in preparatory schools in Turkey (institutions that provide an intensive bridging program to prepare students for English medium instruction at university). The paper reports a qualitative study based on interview data to identify the motivations that prompted the teachers to engage in self-directed PD as well as their views of the usefulness and potential of the on-line resources they made use of. The study is grounded in motivation theory as a base for interpreting the teachers' comments and illustrates how Self-Determination Theory can be used to illustrate how learners' perception of their perceived needs, their sense of autonomy, the role of intrinsic and extrinsic motivation as well as the affirmation that comes from interacting with others in an on-line community and contributes to the teacher's choice of both short term and longer term professional development goals. Other issues that could be relevant in studies of this kind would be the notions of *agency* (the extent to which teachers can actively contribute to and manage change in their own teaching and professional development), *capital* (the potential value of a given choice), and *imagined self* (the teacher's aspirational identity as a knowledgeable language teaching professional). The teachers' experience with different on-line resources led them to favor

Instagram, MOOCs, YouTube and websites as most useful to support their professional development goals.

The study reported by Sezgin Ballıdağ and Kenan Dikilitaş' is invaluable not only for its account of the motivations that prompt teachers to engage in self-directed on-line PD and the benefits they report from doing so, but also for the recommendations they arrive at the kinds of professional support institutions can provide for teachers who wish to engage in self-directed professional development.

Li Li's paper - *Learning Together Online: Insights into Knowledge Construction of Language Teachers in a CSCL Environment* – addresses the interactional processes that take place during an on-line discussion group. Learning through collaboration among teachers has long been a core component of teacher development programs, where teachers work in small groups both in or out of class to discuss readings, share ideas and experiences and reflect on theories and information introduced in lectures. However, the ways in which such collaboration contributes to teachers' developing understanding and beliefs about language teaching is often difficult to determine. Li however demonstrates the affordances provided through teachers' on-line discussion forums, which she studied from a data set consisting of comments posted by 13 teachers participating in a professional development program in China during which they shared their views about the role of technology in language teaching. This provided a rich written record of the teachers' ideas and provided examples of ways in which they shared information, expressed and elaborated opinions, and commented on others' contribution to the forum. Li uses the data she collected to explore the development of the teachers' Technological Pedagogical Content Knowledge (TPACK). To do this Li used a sociocultural discourse analysis approach to describe the communicative processes the teachers made use of during their interactions as well as their emerging beliefs about the role of technology in language teaching. Li describes the kinds of communicative strategies the teachers most often used in articulating their beliefs and achieving a shared understanding and emphasizes the collaborative nature of their interactions as the teachers develop their understanding of concepts and ideas. Two major themes emerged from their discussions, focusing on the affordances technology offers for teachers and learners, and ways in which to make effective use of technology in language teaching. Li's study provides an important perspective on the nature of teacher learning, and particularly of the power of collaborative learning in promoting deep learning as well as the need to prepare teachers for effective strategies needed in collaborative learning through on-line participation in forums and other forms of computer mediated communication.

Nazari and Xodanabeh's paper - *Discursive Change in Second Language Teachers' Online Interactions: A Microgenetic Analysis Study* - provides a valuable complement to Li's study through focusing on the changes that come about in teachers' understanding and level of communication about a pedagogical issue during 10 weeks of participation in an on-line discussion forum. Participation in on-line teacher support groups and on-line communities can make an important contribution to teacher professional development, providing different opportunities for the development of professional knowledge from those that are available when learning is limited to communication that takes place in the course-room. In some contexts, teachers can interact with teachers in many different locations and who have different levels of knowledge and experience, and the fact that their interaction take places digitally rather than face-to-face means that different norms for interactional communication may occur, allowing for a less restrained level of communication that may characterize everyday exchanges that take place elsewhere. Hence the growing body of research such as this that now exists on the nature of teacher-to-teacher interactions which take place in on-line communities and the extent to which they facilitate professional development rather than simply providing opportunities for social interaction. The focus on Nazri and Xodabande's study was the use of mobile phones as a resource in classroom teaching, the benefits

and challenges associated with their use and the extent to which they can be used to support the development of different language skills.

Nazari and Xodabande's study makes use of a different model of discourse analysis from that used by Li's and is based on a category of interactions described as "conversational exchanges". These were exchanges characterized by negotiation of meanings, comparing beliefs and ideas, and elaborating and developing ideas through joint discussion. At the beginning of the study the teachers differed in their experience with using mobile phones as a teaching resource and in their beliefs about the limitations and affordances they provide. As their discussions continued through the 10-week time frame, the authors trace how the participants' ideas developed both in terms of breadth and depth and also in terms of the nature of their discourse which developed in terms of the teachers' ability to express complex ideas in their discussions. Although the example is framed around belief and experiences with using mobile phones, the study really highlights how teachers' pedagogical content knowledge can be developed and extended through participation in an online community with other professionals as well as the ability to use a more sophisticated and nuanced language to communicate their understanding and beliefs.

In the next two papers the focus shifts from teacher-learners' participation in on-line PD to the teacher's experience in delivering on-line PD. Juyoung Song in her paper - *Expanding Teacher Reflection on Emotions in Online Teaching: Grappling with Teacher Identity and Student (non)Participation* – describes her reflections as a teacher educator on how her professional identity as a teacher educator was challenged through the new demands created by on-line teaching as well as the demands on-line learning created for her students. Using data from self-study of her own on-line teaching as well as accounts of her students' experiences, she describes a variety of challenges the transition to on-line teaching created for herself and for her learners. These challenges included the impact of on-line teaching and learning on the participants' emotions and on the teacher's sense of professional identity, authority and self-efficacy. Both the teacher and the learners needed to develop new ways of managing the logistical, social as well as affective demands on-line teaching created for them in order to benefit from the new forms of pedagogy that emerged through the processes of course delivery. For learners this involved new strategies for participation in an on-line learning community, while for the teacher the limited opportunities for social interaction and dialogue with other teachers as well as lack of institutional support created feelings of isolation and vulnerability.

Through critical reflection on her own and her students' experiences, Song provides a powerful account of how she was able to review her understanding of her own teacher identity, review her on-line teaching methods, better understand how to accommodate her on-line teaching to the learners' experience with and approaches to on-line learning as well as articulate some of the conditions that need to be in place to provide a positive and supportive context for on-line professional development.

Marie Yeo in her paper "*Experiencing theory first-hand was delightful and informative*": *Bridging the Theory-Practice Gap in Online Language Assessment Training* describes how she managed a successful transition to on-line teaching with the delivery of a course she would normally have taught in the course room and the new forms of pedagogy she needed to develop in order to achieve this transition. The primary resources she made use of were "a learning management system ... as a repository for materials and place for participants to post and share their forum responses, Zoom for the synchronous webinars, allowing the trainer to group participants in breakout rooms for group discussions, ...and a Whatsapp group to allow instant messaging so that participants could get immediate responses from the community, consisting of the trainer and/or classmates". Yeo describes how in teaching an online course on the nature and practices of assessment, she was able to successfully navigate the difficulties involved in on-line teaching and capitalize on the

opportunities provided through the technological resources available as well as experiential-based learning. The account of her on-line course suggests that the pedagogy she made use of provided course participants with learning opportunities that were equally as engaging and effective as those that would have occurred in the face-to face version of her course. She gives a convincing description of how course participants were taught the principles of assessment through taking part in (i.e. *experiencing*) learning activities that modeled core assessment concepts that were the focus of the course. Central to these processes were the concepts of *feed-forward* (applying what has been learned from feedback to a future assignment), and *assessment as learning* (using assessment feedback as a means of reflecting on the processes of learning).

A question that Yeo's study raises is how the nature and practices of assessment literacy can be provided on a much larger scale than that reported in her study, which involved 16 teachers and required extensive input to each of the participating teachers from Yeo as the lecturer. The teachers themselves were from countries that in most cases have large teacher populations totaling collectively hundreds of thousands (Cambodia, Indonesia, Lao, Malaysia, Myanmar, Philippines, Singapore, Thailand Vietnam). Traditionally in situations such as these the cascade model of professional development is used in order to ensure that educational innovations are implemented at the local level: key teachers are trained in the principles and practices of the innovation, who then return to train teachers in their own schools. As Yeo's paper demonstrates, on-line instruction can be pedagogically effective. A challenge would be to use it as resource, perhaps through the use of Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) and as part of a cascade approach to professional development enabling pedagogical innovations such as assessment literacy to be introduced to much larger numbers of teachers.

In the final paper by Thomas Farrell - "*COVID-19 Challenged Me to Re-Create My Teaching Entirely*": *Adaptation Challenges of Four Novice EFL Teachers of Moving from 'Face-to-Face' To 'Face-to-Screen' Teaching* – although the focus is on the delivery of on-line language teaching rather than on-line professional development, it illustrates issues that arise when teachers are required to change their mode of instruction. Hence it opens up the issue of how teacher preparation courses may need to be re-examined in terms of how well they prepare future teachers on-line rather than classroom-based language teaching. The study describes the experiences of four language teachers in Costa Rica during which the challenges posed by traditional teaching contexts were replaced by a new and unfamiliar set of challenges. Farrell's paper presents a sobering account of the realities faced by language teachers in many parts of the world who teach in private language institutes. These typically operate primarily as businesses alongside their functions as language teaching organizations. Their success depends on maintaining or expanding their student numbers. Many provide little in the way of professional development opportunities for their teachers, whose salaries and contracts may be based on the success which their students perform well on institutional tests and who re-register for further courses at the end of each semester. Teachers who teach in such institutes seek to make their classes as engaging and supportive as possible and aim to receive positive student evaluations. The class climate is typically positive and friendly and provides emotional support for the learners' learning efforts. For students, learning is both a social as well as individual activity and there is often a mutually supportive atmosphere among students.

Based on a series of interviews with the teachers as well as video recordings of their lessons, Farrell's study provides a description of how the change to on-line teaching has a largely negative influence on teachers' and learners' experience of teaching. There is no longer an opportunity for the class to function as a social group. With a switch to on-line teaching, much of the emotional and social support for learning disappears. There is no longer a class of learners as such. Learners are studying remotely in front of their laptops while the teacher's presence is primarily via zoom. The textbook can no longer function as a source of pair and group-based activities and requires considerable adaptation and supplementation; activities take more time to accomplish and can

induce frustration and boredom on the part of teachers and students, and the teacher is no longer to provide the kind of individual support, guidance, and feedback students have come to expect. There are technical problems encountered with the technology and little logical support from the institution that can lead to both frustration and anger. There are the same pressures associated with assessment and the institution now assumes responsibility for assessment excluding what would normally have been part of the teacher's responsibility.

The implications that can be derived from Farrell's study apply to other contexts for the use of on-line learning. Firstly, both teachers and learners need to be adequately prepared for the new modes of teaching and learning made use of in on-line teaching. Secondly, institutions need to acknowledge and understand the specialized knowledge and skills teachers need to acquire in order to provide effective on-line learning. And lastly, institutions need to recognize the important role that teacher professional development can play in order for teachers to provide quality on-line teaching.

## **Conclusion**

As a whole, the papers in this special issue provide a valuable account of the many different dimensions of on-line professional development for language teachers. They also provide examples of research issues and methods that can be used to better understand how on-line teaching and learning shapes the experiences of both teachers and learners. We are grateful to the contributors to this issue for their thoughtful and thought-provoking papers, which will doubtless be the starting point for many kinds of further research into what has now become a major and expanding innovation in education worldwide.