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## Teacher Learning and Professional Development: Views and Practices of Georgian and Turkish Teachers of English

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### Abstract

By the time they graduate from their initial teacher education programs, most teachers are equipped with the basic information and skills they will need to begin their classroom practice – including content knowledge, theories about the teaching and learning process, and various instructional strategies and techniques. However, the process of becoming a teacher does not end there. The most successful teachers are also lifelong learners who continuously work to improve their subject-related knowledge, understand how they can reach their students most effectively, and keep up with new developments in education. Considering the need for teachers to be aware of the concept of *teacher learning* and at the same time be self-aware about their beliefs that impact their practice in that regard, this comparative study will explore and report initial findings of what Georgian and Turkish teachers of English understand from the concepts of “teachers as learners” and “teacher learning,” and what kinds of professional development activities and efforts they are involved in as part of what they think these concepts constitute and require.

**Keywords:** Teacher learning, teachers as learners, being a teacher

## What is Teacher Professional Development?

When people think about professional development for teachers, they often imagine formal workshops or seminars designed to address a particular topic about teaching – for instance, a newly developed teaching technique or educational tool. Professional development activities often occur in structured settings, such as workshops taught by teacher trainers to practitioners in a particular field. However, teachers can also contribute to their professional growth through informal activities such as keeping a reflective teaching journal, sharing experiences with colleagues, or carrying out organized research. In essence, professional development refers to any purposeful effort teachers make to build pedagogical awareness, subject-area knowledge, or practical skills related to their teaching (Mizell, 2010).

We use the term *purposeful* here to stress that these efforts are carried out with the specific objective of improving one's professional practice. As such, gaining experience by spending time in the classroom does not equate to professional development. Instead, professional growth occurs when teachers take the time to reflect critically on their experiences or to seek out developmental opportunities actively and then apply the resulting insights and knowledge as they make decisions about their teaching practice (Yeşilbursa & Çelik, 2020).

## Why Professional Development Matters

### *Helping New Teachers Succeed*

Teaching is a highly complex undertaking. It requires a thorough knowledge of the content being taught and an awareness of how to present the subject matter so that learners can understand it and recognize its importance in their daily lives. In addition, teachers need the skills that will allow them to:

- Motivate students of differing levels of ability and willingness to learn;
- Ensure that the environment is favorable for learning through appropriate classroom management;
- Utilize learning materials and technologies appropriately;
- Administer tests and other assessment instruments effectively;
- Interact successfully with students, administrators, colleagues, and parents;
- Understand and carry out the requirements of the curriculum;
- Handle any number of additional administrative and other tasks (Mizell, 2010).

Teacher education programs can provide some of these competences and may allow student teachers to practice them in a limited way through

field experiences. Nevertheless, no amount of pre-service training can fully prepare them for the intricacies of a real-life classroom. Only learning from experience can provide teachers with these skills, and juggling the requirements can be intensely overwhelming for beginners.

As such, substantial support is needed for those just starting out in their teaching careers. Through professional development activities such as working with mentors and participating in workshops and seminars, new teachers may develop their classroom-related skills more quickly while gaining confidence in their teaching abilities (Alptekin & Tatar, 2011; Murray, 2010; Shawer, 2010). In addition, teachers who receive such support early on are far less likely to quit and are far more likely to view themselves as part of a community of practice (Mizell, 2010) and feel a sense of satisfaction in their careers.

### ***Helping Practicing Teachers Keep Up with New Developments***

Professional development is not just for teachers who are new and inexperienced. Participation in skills- and knowledge-building opportunities significantly benefits *all* classroom teachers at any level of experience. One of the most important reasons for teachers to attend to their professional growth is the need to stay in touch with current practice. With ongoing research into the ways that learning takes place, ideas about how education should be carried out are continually being revised, often resulting in new pedagogical approaches and teaching methods.

At the same time, technological advances are constantly giving rise to new teaching tools and ways of involving students in the learning process. All these potentially impact the teaching and learning process, but teachers cannot take advantage of such opportunities unless they are aware of them (Murray, 2010; Richards & Farrell, 2005). Therefore, teachers are responsible for keeping up with current ideas and innovations in their field and determining, through experience and critical analysis, whether incorporating these into their own practice will be beneficial. Teachers who fail to do so may miss important opportunities and put their students at risk of falling behind (Çelik, 2016).

Teachers can engage in various forms of professional development activities resources, such as, among others, workshops, seminars/webinars, conferences, peer observation, self-monitoring, journaling, teaching portfolios, professional learning communities, support groups, professional journals and organizations, and teacher/practitioner/action research (Çelik, 2020; Çelik, 2016; Çelik & Dikilitaş, 2015; Yeşilbursa & Çelik, 2020).

In light of the discussion above, this contrastive study investigated the following research questions:

- What do Georgian and Turkish teachers of English understand from the concepts of “teachers as learners” and “teacher learning”?
- What kinds of professional development activities and efforts are they involved in as part of what they think these concepts constitute and require?

## Methodology

An online survey was sent out to Georgian and Turkish teachers of English recruited through convenience sampling. Fifty-four respondents (19 Georgian & 35 Turkish) participated in this descriptive research study. As Nassaji (2005) argues, descriptive research aims “to describe a phenomenon and its characteristics” as it is “more concerned with what rather than how or why something has happened” (p. 129).

The basic demographic information of the participants can be found in Table 1.

**Table 1.** Demographic Information (Combined Group)

Participant Demographics	
<b>Gender</b>	41 females and 13 males
<b>Age range</b>	15 in their 20s, 26 in their 30s, and 13 in their 40s
<b>Years of experience</b>	15 with less than 5 years, 18 with 5 to 9 years, 7 with 10 to 14 years, 7 with 15 to 19 years, 4 with 20 to 24 years, and 3 with 25 to 29 years
<b>Grades taught</b>	1 through 12

Responses to closed-ended questions were analyzed using descriptive statistics, while responses to open-ended questions were analyzed using conceptual content analysis (Carley, 1990). Conceptual content analysis is used to determine the existence and frequency of instances of words, phrases, sentences, and explicit or implicit concepts and themes in a text.

## Results and Discussion

Based on the participants’ answers, it was observed that the Georgian teachers appeared to have a vaguer idea about the concepts of “Teachers as Learners” and “Teacher Learning” (see the table covering all definitions in the Appendix). Some Georgian participants misinterpreted these concepts (N=5). To illustrate, one Georgian teacher defined teacher learning as “teachers’ ability to create a student-centered classroom process, where all students will have an equal chance to reveal their abilities” (Georgian Participant #13). Still another one described the concept of teacher learning as the “learning outcome of experienced teachers” (Georgian Participant #17). On the other hand, the analysis showed that the Turkish teachers of English were more thorough with their understanding of these concepts. Yet, despite their cognizance, there was one specific instance of poor

understanding by a Turkish teacher, referring to the concepts as “Using teacher-oriented methods during the teaching process” (Turkish Participant #24).

While the proportion of Turkish teachers of English who seemed to have grasped and clarified these concepts was higher than those of the Georgian teachers, both groups seemed to have an inadequate conception and consideration of the concepts that needed further elaboration of relevant practice. With that said, the definitions offered by the Georgian teachers who seemed to understand the concepts correctly were fairly superficial. Most used the keywords “non-stop learning” and “teachers as lifelong learners” to describe the concepts; however, their definitions did not demonstrate an understanding of the particulars and exigencies of those concepts. To illustrate, the explanation of the following Georgian teacher, who said “I think good teachers are the ones who are lifelong learners. When teachers are engaged in professional learning, the whole community benefits from them” (Georgian Participant #12), showed that the participant highlighted the continuous nature of teacher professional development. However, the description lacked details to highlight the nature of the concepts, i.e., ways and forms of motivation. On the other hand, based on the responses, it could be argued that the Turkish participants offered more details about the nature of professional development and its forms, highlighting the voluntary attempts of teachers to equip themselves with related knowledge and skills to update themselves and turn their classes into motivating and engaging spheres. To illustrate, one participant stated:

Some might think graduating from the university makes you an expert in your profession. It might be the case for some, but lifelong learning is how to expand your knowledge and improve in whatever you do. In our case, it's being a learner at the same time as being a teacher and learning how to approach students from all backgrounds and how to use technology that is changing every day and all the things in life that can even help better teaching. For example, teaching English does not require artistic knowledge, but one can learn how to analyze children's drawings. We must keep learning daily to teach in a very dynamic society. And the more you know, the more you question your teaching, which helps you improve. (Turkish Participant #1)

The explanation above illustrated that the participant was aware of the non-stop developmental nature of teacher learning and the need to enhance competencies to keep up with the latest technologies to produce better teaching. Besides, the participants touched on the importance of “questioning teaching,” which highlighted reflective practice.

Lastly, the analysis of the explanations offered by the participants showed that they referred to similar motivations for teacher learning. The Georgian teachers listed justifications such as meeting the diverse needs of students, enjoying teaching, offering engaging teaching, and keeping up with the latest tendencies in teaching methodologies, approaches, materials, and activities. On the other hand, their Turkish counterparts offered justifications such as keeping up with the latest trends in teaching and changing technology, responding to students' diverse needs, updating themselves and motivating themselves professionally. To illustrate, the following participants highlighted the role of the changing world and the need to keep up with these changing tendencies in teacher learning:

We live in times when the world is developing rapidly; hence the resources accessible to students are plenty. Therefore, if a teacher is willing to maintain an engaging environment while increasing the efficiency of lessons, keeping up with the latest tendencies is a must for them. And what better way of achieving that than walking a mile in a student's shoes by constantly learning something new? (Georgian Participant #4).

Overall, based on the written answers offered by the Georgian and Turkish teachers of English about the concepts of “Teachers as Learners” and “Teacher Learning,” it could be concluded that both parties have a vague and incomplete understanding of teacher professional development although the Turkish participants had a better sense of the concepts.

To answer the second research question, the participants were asked what kinds of professional development activities and efforts they were involved in as part of what they thought these concepts constituted and required. It was seen that most teachers in both groups reported having been involved in PD efforts in one way or another. However, while some PD activities were popular with both groups (e.g., PD Trainings/Courses/Programs and PD Workshops/Seminars/Webinars), some PD activities were more popular for one group other another (E.g., Turkish teachers mentioned “Graduate Degree Programs” often while no Georgian teachers brought them up). In other words, the Georgian EFL teachers listed well-known and usual professional development activities such as conferences, workshops, reading articles and books, and membership in professional organizations. On the other hand, their Turkish counterparts listed more varied ones, including graduate degree programs (N=12), online teacher education opportunities (PD Websites, Videos, etc.) (N=2), self-improvement/personal development (e.g., learning other languages) (N=2), and student evaluations/feedback (N=1).

Professional development activities reported by each group and their counts are provided in Table 2 below.

**Table 2.** Professional Development Activities Reported

Reported Professional Development Activities and How Often They Were Reported	
Georgian Teachers	Turkish Teachers
PD Trainings/Courses/Programs (12)	PD Trainings/Courses/Programs/Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) (21)
Conferences (9)	PD Workshops/Seminars/Webinars (13)
PD Workshops/Seminars/Webinars (7)	Graduate Degree Programs (12)
Read/Review Articles/Books (4)	Projects (Erasmus+, eTwinning, Comenius, Youth Exchange, etc.) (7)
Peer Observations (3)	Read Articles/Books (4)
Teaching/Reflective Journals (3)	Conferences (4)
Membership in Professional Organizations/Clubs (3)	Celta/Delta/Certificate Courses/Programs (2)
Teaching Portfolios (2)	Online Teacher Education Opportunities (PD Websites, Videos, etc.) (2)
Celta/Delta/Certificate Courses/Programs (1)	Peer Coaching (2)
Projects (Erasmus+, eTwinning, Comenius, Youth Exchange, etc.) (1)	Self-improvement/Personal Development (e.g., learning other languages) (2)
	Membership in Professional Organizations/Clubs (1)
	Teaching/Reflective Journals (1)
	Self-Monitoring (1)
	Student Evaluations/Feedback (1)

## Conclusion

This comparative study aimed to explore and report what Georgian and Turkish teachers of English understood from the concepts of “teachers as learners” and “teacher learning,” and what kinds of professional development activities and efforts they were involved in as part of what they thought these concepts constituted and required. Based on the conceptual content analysis, it could be concluded that both parties had a limited understanding of these concepts, although the Turkish participants’ answers were more comprehensive. Besides, most teachers in both groups reported having been involved in PD efforts in one way or another; however, the Turkish counterparts listed more varied professional activities than their Georgian counterparts.

## Implications and Suggestions

While the participants reported engaging in various PD activities, the results showed that teachers of English in both countries were not involved in teacher research as part of their professional growth. Thus, they should be

encouraged to conduct teacher/practitioner/action/classroom-based research to observe their and their students' behavior, reflect on their practice, and identify problems and potential solutions to those problems. It should be noted that pre-service teacher training programs and institutions have an essential role in preparing and inspiring teacher candidates to be lifelong learners. Next, ministries of national education should devise measures to routinely track, encourage and ease English language teachers' PD efforts and activities. Finally, professional organizations in both countries should support English language teachers in their PD efforts and activities.

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## Appendix

Definitions Offered for “Teachers as Learners” and “Teacher Learning”?	
Georgian Teachers	Turkish Teachers
<p><i>From time to time, I believe that teachers need to take time off from teaching and start learning things again. Renewing techniques is vital not only in the ever-evolving world of education but also for personal reasons. For one, repeating the same couple of techniques can result in teachers losing interest and motivation, affecting their performance. At the same time, each student is unique in their needs and studying methods, so it would be extremely hard for a teacher who doesn't learn new approaches to satisfy the requirements of various types of students.</i></p>	<p><i>Some might think graduating from the university makes you an expert in your profession. It might be the case for some, but lifelong learning is how to expand your knowledge and improve in whatever you do. In our case, it's being a learner at the same time as being a teacher and learning how to approach students from all backgrounds and how to use technology that is changing every day and all the things in life that can even help better teaching. For example, teaching English does not require artistic knowledge, but one can learn how to analyze children's drawings. We must keep learning daily to teach in a very dynamic society. And the more you know, the more you question your teaching, which helps you improve.</i></p>
<p><i>Working with students is not all about teaching for me. Sometimes, it means learning new things from them as well. What I mean is that individuals, kids especially, have unlimited imagination, different backgrounds, and different, a lot of the times, unique views when it comes to even the most ordinary things. Therefore, I believe it is important that teachers demonstrate openness toward their extraordinary ways of thinking, adopt these</i></p>	<p><i>As far as I understand, these two terms are the same. Teacher learning means the teachers' improvements in their fields—any efforts to boost their teaching skills. These efforts are actually for their students' own good. Following new methods and current issues in education can be considered a teacher learning activity. ... The teachers, naturally, must be good learners. I think it is compulsory because the ones who do not learn new things (methods, techniques,</i></p>

<p><i>more authentic approaches and introduce them to the learning environment to promote diversity and broader ways of interpretation.</i></p>	<p><i>pedagogy, scientific improvements) cannot teach their students—workshops, seminars, some lectures, and particular teacher groups like professional learning communities. The teachers gain learner identity through these PD activities.</i></p>
<p><i>As John Cotton Dana has stated, “those who dare to teach must never cease to learn.” For me, it is of paramount importance to be able to offer my students constantly renewed approaches, materials, and activities, which would enhance their engagement during lessons. However, in order not to run out of fresh ideas and to develop constantly, it is required that teachers themselves become learners. Not everything can be acquired at once, can it?</i></p>	<p><i>I believe it is a part of professional development which enables teachers to become more equipped with the accumulated wisdom. Teachers, as learners, are eager to keep up with the contemporary methods to engage learners in their classes effectively. Reflection and constructive feedback are essential practices in teaching and learning; active collaboration and cooperation for those teachers are needed to create a positive and caring environment.</i></p>
<p><i>We live in times when the world is developing rapidly; hence the resources accessible to students are plenty. Therefore, if a teacher is willing to maintain an engaging environment while increasing the efficiency of lessons, keeping up with the latest tendencies is a must for them. And what better way of achieving that than walking a mile in a student's shoes by constantly learning something new?</i></p>	<p><i>Being a learner is one of the essential roles of a teacher because there is always something new to learn. Learners and technology are changing daily, so teachers need to refresh their knowledge and learn new skills and teaching techniques. Teacher learning is vital for professional development. Therefore, teachers should be involved in lifelong learning.</i></p>
<p><i>Teacher learning is a way of learning where students are expected to comprehend the material and then prepare lesson plans to teach students according to their needs. Teachers being learners is an excellent way of acquiring new skills even at an old age, whether a student sharing their knowledge or someone more experienced. In this case, teachers experience what it's like being a learner again; hence, they have more insight into students' expectations and their pace of learning. This way, they can introduce tailor-made techniques for each type of student.</i></p>	<p><i>Professional development is vital in the teaching and learning process. Therefore, teachers constantly learn during the process. They learn from their colleagues and students. This enables them to be experts in using different techniques and methods. They reflect on their preferences and look at what works and does not. Teachers should update themselves according to current situations, innovations, and modern methods. Thus, they are learning in this respect. Accordingly, teachers are also called teachers as learners.</i></p>
<p><i>Ensuring all students learn is a responsibility that requires collaborative and collective effort. By this, I mean that the teacher providing the knowledge for the kids must be learning from those with more experience. Not only would this help them broaden their horizons and conduct more diverse lessons but to synthesize their own, newer approaches using multiple techniques</i></p>	<p><i>To teach effectively, teachers should continue their learning process as new methods and practices emerge in time. Teachers are also learners; there is nothing to be ashamed of not knowing. When teachers think they have finished their studies, it does not mean that learning finishes as well. In my opinion, teachers must continue their lifelong learning</i></p>

<i>may have to offer.</i>	<i>journey.</i>
<i>I think teachers must be lifelong learners and always strive for continuous professional development. Otherwise, they will not be able to enjoy teaching, and unfortunately, the same will be valid for their students' learning.</i>	<i>In my opinion, teacher learning is the adventure of learning to teach by teachers who have not yet had experience in their major. In this adventure, teacher knowledge is improved. In addition, the teacher identity is acquired, and the acquired teacher identity is differentiated.</i>
<i>I think that there is a big difference between Teacher learning to teach. Teaching skill development ~Professional development</i>	<i>Teachers are not perfect, complete beings after they become teachers. They are always in need of learning more things. Therefore, they should always try their best to become better. The critical fact here is that they understand their needs. If they know that what they know is not enough, they will try to improve themselves.</i>
<i>Teachers transfer knowledge, which means they relearn during this process, i.e., reinforce their knowledge. Thus, they are life-long learners and develop their skills continuously.</i>	<i>Learning is a continuous process, and it is also valid for teachers. As time goes on, teachers need to be refreshed and updated. In addition, technology, new teaching methods, and changing needs of students push teachers to become qualified.</i>
<i>Teachers must constantly develop professionally to learn new things and acquire or master teaching techniques and methods. Therefore, we - teachers are lifelong learners and should never cease learning.</i>	<i>It means the development of teachers in terms of four skills. First, teachers are also learners because they need to learn the innovations in their fields. If they see themselves as perfect, this will harm both themselves and their students.</i>
<i>Well, if you want to be a good teacher, you should not stop developing; you should think about the needs, objectives, strategies, outcomes, etc.—that's the combined process we must follow.</i>	<i>Learning is a lifelong process. It never stops, nor do teachers. We must renew ourselves to be good enough for the pupils. Everything that surrounds us is changing; why should we remain the same?</i>
<i>I think good teachers are the ones who are lifelong learners. When teachers are engaged in professional learning, the whole community benefits from them.</i>	<i>A life-long learner who contributes to himself /herself and his/her community. Because teachers must adapt to the changes, they must constantly update themselves.</i>
<i>Teachers' ability to create a student-centered classroom process, where all students will have an equal chance to reveal their abilities.</i>	<i>As teachers, we must improve ourselves to avoid falling behind the time. But, most importantly, we must motivate ourselves by learning new things and developing.</i>
<i>Lifelong learning is the component of teacher learning; teachers need guidance, support, and growth at any career stage.</i>	<i>Learning is a lifelong process. It never stops, nor do teachers. We must renew ourselves to be good enough for the pupils. Everything that surrounds us is changing; why should we remain the same?</i>
<i>The terms indicate that teaching is a cohesive process of non-stop learning and teaching—learn to teach and teach to learn.</i>	<i>A process in which teachers engage in activities that lead to a positive change in their whole life, and they improve their skills to meet the needs of their students.</i>

<i>Teachers, like learners, should develop knowledge and skills to respond to students' needs.</i>	<i>Learning is a lifelong process. Both students and teachers learn together. Teachers learn better when they teach.</i>
<i>Learning outcome of experienced teachers.</i>	<i>Teaching is a complex process. It has many different aspects. Therefore, teachers should be considered learners.</i>
<i>It is a great pleasure to help others with gathering.</i>	<i>Teachers are lifelong learners as teachers need to refresh themselves and gain the necessary skills required for teaching.</i>
	<i>To improve your professional knowledge and teaching practice</i>
	<i>It means a teacher is constantly growing in life and never says she/he knows everything.</i>
	<i>Teachers must improve themselves as time changes and be ready for each development.</i>
	<i>Improvement and progress. Stability kills imagination, creativity, and adaptability.</i>
	<i>... teachers learn from the learning process and students while teaching something.</i>
	<i>Using teacher-oriented methods during the teaching process</i>
	<i>It is necessary to stay aware of the newest techniques and become competent in the field.</i>
	<i>A teacher is a person who has to learn all the time for teaching.</i>
	<i>Gaining knowledge and experience over time. A teacher who continuously learns from everything.</i>
	<i>It is a suggested process of learning for the professional development of teachers.</i>
	<i>Teachers must continually improve themselves to keep up with the latest technological developments.</i>
	<i>Teachers are learners in their specific fields.</i>
	<i>Learning is a process that never ends.</i>