This study assessed perceptions and practices of secondary schools (Grade 9-12) EFL teachers' self-initiated professional development. A questionnaire of Likert scale items and open-ended questions was used to gather data from thirty-two teachers. The teachers were asked to fill out the questionnaire at Bahir Dar University during their registration for pursuing their second degree in English education. The collected data were analyzed in the form of descriptive statistics and thematic analysis. The findings revealed that despite insufficient practices, the teachers had clear consensus on the need for employing self-initiated professional development at their working environment. There seemed to have more awareness of self-driven professionalism with a few practical experiences in their workplaces. Their school management problems, limited learning facilities, and discouraging traditions of self-improvement created pressure on teachers' implementation of the self-initiated professional development.

Key words: Self-initiated, professional development, EFL teachers' development.

INTRODUCTION

Second/foreign language teachers' professional development has shown a shift of formal institutionalized based practices to individual driven activities where teachers are assumed to engage in careerism (self learning, evaluating, and reflecting). More responsibility of professional improvement has been given to the teachers themselves with the assumption that individuals could identify their own learning needs and more interested in taking actions when they are accountable for their own professional development. A self-initiated professional development generally refers to a "process in which a learner assumes primary responsibility for planning, implementing, and evaluating the learning process where an education agent or resource often plays a facilitating role in the process" (Guskey, 2000:57). That is, with some guidance and coordination roles of their institutions or schools that teachers are required to identify their needs of professional improvement, design strategies of self-development and take actions accordingly.

Richards and Farrell (2005) also note that teacher education has shifted its focus from institutional and managerial dominated fashion to individual teachers' self-directed process where provision of resources and materials of self-improvement are ensured in consultation with the institution and management bodies. The ultimate goal of educating teachers is not only helping them master the scientific concepts of teaching and learning the second/foreign languages but also enabling them to
make use of the skills and knowledge they have gained in actual classroom instructions. For example, Darling-Hammond and Bransford (2005:359) argue that teacher education must lay the foundation for life-long learning, with the ultimate goal of “helping teachers become professionals who are adaptive experts”. Adaptive experts refer to people who are able to master the skills and strategies to plan, manage, carry out, and assess the activities of teaching and learning while at the same time adapting and adjusting to the complexities that are embedded in those activities in order to make sound instructional decisions within the contexts in which they teach.

Teachers, in the self-initiated professional development approach, are expected or required to ask for assistance from institutions and colleagues starting from planning areas of improvement up to evaluating whether the teachers bring about the intended professional improvement (Texas Education Agency, 1997). Murray (2010) emphasized the role of collegial cooperation and collaboration for individual teachers’ personal professional improvement where more confidence and determination of learning emerge. Teachers, thus, usually employ the self-initiated professional development in different ways like reading a journal article of a teacher’s interest, conducting a mini classroom research. Self-monitoring is also a starting point for professional improvement endeavors (Sparks and Louks-Horsley, 1989). An EFL teacher in South Korea was reported in using her own writing lessons observations as means of promoting her effectiveness in writing lesson delivery (Richards and Farrell, 2005; Bailey et al., 2001). The same authors also mentioned teacher support groups established by EFL teacher in Seoul, South Korea for professional upgrading. Besides, keeping journal writing for developing aspects of teaching techniques by an EFL teacher in Japan and another EFL teacher in Thailand were observed. Even, conducting an action research for solving immediate classroom instructional problem has become a common practice of EFL teachers who are curious and interested in self-initiated professional development (Ribeiro, 2002).

Using a variety of self-initiated professional development strategies for effective professionalism has been well acknowledged and practiced in many parts of EFL teacher education. As far as this reading is concerned, the status of self-initiated professional development of EFL teachers in Ethiopia seems to be known. Whether the teachers are aware of the significant role of the self-initiated professional development in professional upgrading has not yet been well known in the country.

Objectives of the study

This study aimed at addressing the following objectives.

1. To examine high school EFL teachers’ understanding about the self-initiated professional development activities in their career

METHODS

Design

As it is mentioned in the preceding section, this study intended to see high school EFL teachers’ awareness and practices of self-initiated professional development in their day to day professional work. The study is, thus, a kind of descriptive survey of limited scope. It has only thirty-two participants (high school EFL teachers) and a questionnaire based instrument of closed ended and open ended items.

Participants

The current study involved thirty-two EFL teachers from ten high schools of the country. The teachers were selected from their respective high schools. They were asked conveniently to fill out the questionnaire at Bahir Dar University during which the teachers were applying for graduate program study (TEFL). Therefore, all of the teachers had a BA/Bed degree in English teaching. They also had three to twenty years of teaching experience at high schools. The teachers had more experience of teaching large classes having 40 to 60 students in a class. Thus, the thirty-two EFL teachers were asked to fill out the survey at the time of their application to the university for further education.

Instrument and procedures of data analysis

This study employed a questionnaire that focuses on the nature of self-initiated professional development. The questionnaire had two basic parts. Part one includes general information about the participants’ educational and work experience. While part two presents theoretical roles and practical experiences of the self-initiated professional development in EFL contexts. This part had two kinds of items, one of which is closed ended and the other is open ended. The items were designed based on reviews of literature on self focused or/and personal based EFL teachers’ professional development (Richards and Farrell, 2005).

The questionnaire was administered to individual EFL teachers while every teacher was physically applying to Bahir Dar University registrar office for graduate program. The participants took two to five days to return the filled in questionnaire. Since the sample size was too small, the collected data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, and responses of open ended items were analyzed thematically so as to substantiate the results of the statistics.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

As Figure 1 shows, the teachers’ mean response to each item clearly indicated their agreement to the need for practicing self-initiated professional development activities and opportunities in their career. For example, the teachers strongly acknowledged the statements that reflect the importance of updating themselves with existing professional skills and competence, developing
sense of ownership in their professional competence and giving reflections on their own practices (Mean 4.65; Mean, 4.54 and Mean, 4.53). Such consensus on the significant role of self-initiated professional development for achieving higher professional competence could be taken as a valuable ground for practicing different tasks and activities that demand the teachers’ initiative in professional upgrading.

Moreover, in the open-ended questions, the teachers expressed their positive feelings towards employing self-initiated professional development, and they noted that other stakeholders should encourage the teachers’ endeavor for successful implementation. The teachers, however, 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 competence through their personal effort and initiative. However, the teachers did not seem to be consistent in their responses to the inquiries of employing the self-initiated professional development tasks and activities at their work.

As Figure 2 shows, the teachers reported having frequent practices of a few professional development activities such as speaking in their classroom lessons, reading school textbooks, managing classrooms and planning their lessons (Mean, 3.93; Mean, 3.87; Mean, 3.75; Mean, 3.72 respectively). That is, the teachers reported that out of fourteen professional development activities only four were taken as their day-to-day practices along with their teaching career. On the other hand, more activities of the professional development (such as reading other books, magazines and publications; conversations with colleagues, listening to radio and watching movies) were not part of the teachers’ actual self-training package.

The teachers’ responses to the open-ended questions, however, contradicted this result that the teachers reported their frequent practices of the self-development activities (e.g., collegial sharing of ideas, reading different materials, participating in school language clubs and other related engagements). Therefore, there seemed to have some form of contradictions and inconsistencies in the teachers’ responses of the closed-ended questions and the open-ended ones. That is, the teachers’ responses to most of the closed-ended items revealed insignificant practices of the professional development activities, while as the teachers’ response to the open-ended items revealed their making use of professional development activities.
Generally, given such inconsistent responses, the teachers’ positive orientation of the self-initiated professional development activities, as it is shown in the preceding table, did not seem to be applied in their day-to-day professional work. That is, the teachers appeared not to apply the self-professional development tasks and activities that they felt were important for their professional skills and competencies.

As Figure 3 shows, the teachers’ mean responses to various factors affecting their self-initiated professional development revealed only on two factors i.e., lack of access to required resources and lack of encouragement system (Mean, 3.72; Mean, 3.53 respectively). The teachers do not seem to acknowledge more factors that hinder their self-driven efforts of professional improvement. For example, they do not acknowledge lack of commitment, awareness and capacity, self-confidence and shortage of time as obstacles of their self-driven
professional development practices. The teachers, thus, seem to emphasize their schools' limited resources provision and encouragement mechanisms as the major factors for conducting professional development activities. The teachers, in their responses of open-ended questions, also show similar concerns in that the existing school management system and resources availability do not encourage them in undertaking their self-driven professional development activities. For example, they commonly stated three major challenges they face in employing the self-improvement activities at their work places. These were their schools' administrative systems, socio-cultural elements and inadequate resources and materials for practicing professional development.

Discussion

This study results indicated that the teachers' concern of having self-initiated professional development activities appeared noticeable. They seemed to understand that teachers of English as a Foreign Language need to develop their profession through personally driven activities that can be undertaken at their work places. For example, the teachers rated more on the importance of updating themselves in their profession, doing self-evaluation and colleague based reflections of pedagogic effectiveness of their classroom activities in helping students achieve the intended objectives of teaching. They also noted that any form of self-initiated professional development practices had to be encouraged by incentives of salary increment and other related benefits. A similar study conducted at elementary school English teachers in Gaza (Herzallah, 2011), indicated that money and other forms of incentives like promotion and reward could affect the proper implementation of self-initiated professional development practices. Ahmed’s (2003) study on secondary school EFL teachers' professional development also stated financial constraint as a major problem for employing self-driven professional development activities in their schools.

Surprisingly, the teachers in their self-reported practices of the self-initiated professional development did not confirm their implementations of the self-driven professional development during their career. The teachers, of course, revealed their higher mean responses to the factors affecting implementations like lack of resources and lack of encouraging school management. In their responses to the open-ended questions, they also noted that there were difficulties of accessing materials and resources required for personally driven professional improvement. Even, the existing school traditions hindered them from exercising self improvement in teaching and learning. These Justifications seemed to have considerable impact on their practices as they are working in one of the developing countries in the world. However, the astonishing result for this study was non-reactive responses to their personal commitment as a factor exerting impact in their application of self-initiated professional development practices. That is, self-initiated professional development, by its own nature, demand teachers to be self motivated and committed regardless of the available backing and encouragement (Guskey, 2000).

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study attempted to assess the teachers’ conceptions about the role of the self-initiated professional development and the practical experiences they had in improving their professions. A few conclusions were drawn from the survey results.

1. The teachers seemed to be more conscious about the importance of self-initiated professional development. The participant teachers tended to acknowledge the significant roles that the self-driven activities and tasks of professionalism in bringing about real change on teachers' pedagogical effectiveness and efficiency.  
2. The teachers appeared to decline on implementing personally driven professional tasks and activities during their day-day-to life, and  
3. The teachers seemed to be less confident on the provisions of support and follow up from their schools and others concerned for carrying out the self-initiated professional development.

Therefore, for the teachers to involve in practical experiences of professionalism, not only preparing their working environment suitable but also helping the teachers recognize the challenges they have to face in doing professional development activities and tasks. That is, the teachers should be well aware of the risks and the required commitment of carrying out personally focused and motivated professionalism.

Conflict of Interests

The author has not declared any conflict of interests.

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