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In-service Teachers' Perceptions of the Impact of Applied Language Studies MA Programs on Their Professional Development: The Case of Moulay Ismail University, Morocco

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Abstract:

Globally speaking, the imperative significance and need for teachers' professional development to face the challenges of the 21st century is the heart of reforms in education. Following this important catalyst, educational reforms in Morocco, especially the National Charter of Education (2000), the Strategic Version (2015-2030), and the Road Map (2023-2026), have emphasized and insisted on the importance of enabling Moroccan EFL teachers from professional development opportunities and experiences for their professional growth and career development. Therefore, this qualitative study aimed to explore in-service teachers' perceptions of the impact of the Applied Language Studies master program of Moulay Ismail University on their professional development as a golden opportunity for teachers to be professionally developed. The study adopted a case study design. A semi-structured questionnaire with open-ended questions was used as an instrument for data collection. Twenty-five in-service teachers were sampled through a convenience sampling procedure to complete the questionnaires. The findings showed that in-service teachers recognized the impact of the master program in broadening their content knowledge and in developing their communication and teaching analytical and critical thinking skills. The study concluded that in-service teachers had positive perceptions of the impact of the program on their professional development even though they encountered certain difficulties and challenges, such as stress and time. The study recommended that decision-makers respond effectively to in-service teachers' challenges by enabling them to become real partners in the process of reforming and improving the quality of the program.

Keywords: Applied language studies, professional development, English language teaching, English as a foreign language, educational program evaluation

1. Introduction

There is a growing need for teachers' professional development in general and professional learning programs in particular to address and face the challenges of the 21st century in education. According to the Moroccan National Charter for Education and Training (2000), Moroccan teachers, in general, and ELT teachers, in particular, are required to be fully equipped with the necessary skills, knowledge and competencies, including pedagogical, social, personal and professional competencies to be professionally developed in terms of their teaching practices and academic future as well. Accordingly, educators urge the adoption of a professional development vision in this situation for rebuilding teachers' knowledge and retraining them in a manner appropriate to respond effectively to the demands of modern education. Hand in gloves with this important catalyst, master programs in general and the Applied Language Studies MA of Moulay Ismail University, Faculty of Art and Humanities in particular is a golden chance for in-service teachers to develop professionally.

1.1. Background to the Issue of Professional Development for Teachers

The idea that teachers, without exception, require professional development is crystal clear. As far as this study is concerned, it focuses on professional development programs, taking into account the MA program of Applied Language Studies at Moulay Ismail University as a case study. In other words, the paper explores the perceptions of in-service teachers on the impact of the Applied Language Studies master program on their professional development. Therefore, the rationale behind conducting this research is based on the following assumptions. First, the field of language teaching and learning is not a fixed discipline. Second, noting is everlasting. Third, the field of education must undergo continual change. In this regard, EFL teachers in general and in-service teachers in particular are required to cope with the changes that take place in the field of education. Teachers are also required to refresh, reinforce, and update their knowledge about teaching

and learning, reflect upon their teaching practices, and seek ways to be professionally developed. One way of doing so is by engaging and enrolling in formal continuing professional development programs, including master's programs.

1.2. Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework for this study is based on the following key concepts. The first concept dealt with in this study is the adult learning theory. According to the literature, this theory is based on the idea of a theoretical framework that emphasizes the unique characteristics and needs of adult learners, including their prior experiences and knowledge, their motivation for learning, and their practical goals and interests (Knowles, 1968). As far as the current study is concerned, it addresses the motivation and the real driving force of in-service teachers to enroll in the Applied Language Studies master program. Their needs and interests are also taken into consideration. The second concept discussed is the professional development theory. This theory refers to a framework or a set of principles that guide the design and implementation of programs and activities to enhance knowledge, skills, and competencies in various fields. This theory also provides a conceptual basis for understanding how professionals learn, develop, and grow throughout their careers. In the same vein, professional development theory provides a foundation for designing effective learning experiences, training programs, mentoring relationships, and other forms of support for professionals. It also helps educators and organizations understand the principles and factors that contribute to effective professional development and guides the development of strategies to facilitate continuous learning and improvement (Fullen, 1995). The third concept addressed in this paper is the reflective practice theory. This theory is based on the premise that emphasizes the importance of reflection and self-assessment in the process of professional development. It also emphasizes the critical examination of one's own experiences, actions, and beliefs to enhance professional growth. This theory also encourages individuals to reflect on their practices, identify strengths and weaknesses, and make improvements based on evidence and feedback (Finlay, 2008). Based on this, this study tried to focus on the strengths and weaknesses of the Applied Language Studies master program from in-service teachers' perspectives and see how the program can be improved and developed based on the respondents' recommendations and suggestions. The last but not least concept discussed is interpretivism. This concept has to do with a philosophical paradigm that emphasizes the importance of understanding social phenomena from the perspective of the individuals involved and stresses the role of interpretation and meaning-making in shaping social reality. By using the interpretivism perspective and qualitative research, the researcher questions in-service teachers to understand their perceptions and views. This concept also allows the researcher to investigate the research problem through many different perspectives regarding the impact of the ALS master program on in-service teachers' professional development (Butin, 2010). While there may not be one best answer, structuring the research in an interpretivism approach allows the researcher to gather data from various participants to investigate their perceptions of the impact of the ALS master program on their professional development.

Generally speaking, the conceptual framework in this study suggests that the Applied Language Studies master program is designed to enhance the language skills of in-service teachers, which in turn can contribute to their professional development. The impact of the program on professional development is likely to be mediated by the perceptions that in-service teachers have of the program. Therefore, the paradigms of adult learning theory, professional development theory, reflective practice theory, and interpretivism can be used to analyze and interpret the data collected from in-service teachers in order to understand the ways in which the program affects their professional growth and development, the challenges they face in engaging with the program, and the ways in which the program can be improved to better support their professional development. The conceptual framework of the study also helps the researcher organize and interpret the data collected from in-service teachers and guides the analysis of the factors that shape their perceptions of the program's impact on their professional development.

1.3. Professional Development within the Moroccan Context

Upon examining the Moroccan National Charter for Education and Training (2000) and the Strategic Vision (2015-2030), it is evident that implementing professional development (PD) training has become a priority to speed up reforms in the education and training system in Morocco. The success of the Moroccan school system depends on learners linking their learning within the school to their external environment, allowing for easy inclusion in the job market. The Ministry of Education realized that empowering Moroccan learners with skills and abilities that guarantee easy access to the workforce can happen only through education, and achieving this goal requires implementing solid life-long training and teacher development programs. The Strategic Vision (2015-2030) is an additional reform that aims to fix past mistakes, including the non-actualization of many educational reform projects such as CPD. The PD training consists of different modules that aim to improve in-service teachers' knowledge and skills in teaching content, didactics, and assessment techniques. Each module lasts for 30 hours, and the content should be novel and suggested by teachers through a needs analysis checklist. The training is organized by inspectors and professors from institutions specializing in education and teacher training, such as ENSs and CRMEFs. The new Minister of Education, Chakib Benmoussa, has devoted greater attention to PD training and allocated a huge budget of about 6 billion dirhams to enable Moroccan public school teachers to respond to the challenges of the 21st century effectively and be professionally developed (Bouhaissa & Morchid, 2022).

1.4. Teachers' Professional Development

Teachers' professional development has a basic and great impact on sustaining a teacher's knowledge base and teaching skills. Teachers' professional development can be defined as the professional growth or improvement a teacher achieves as a result of gaining experience and knowledge and examining his or her teaching systematically (Richards & Schmidt, 2002). Based on this definition, one can say that teachers' professional development includes all the professional

occasions and experiences teachers seize to improve the quality of their teaching practices and seek professional growth. Student teachers find a lot of opportunities to develop their knowledge base and teaching skills in the field during the pre-service program. As they graduate from pre-service education program and enter the field of teaching, they become novice teachers. Novice teachers may encounter many challenges and obstacles as they start teaching in their classrooms. After the pre-service program is completed, there are not many opportunities and chances for them to develop their teaching skills and language skills, as the resources they received during the pre-service program may not be available to them. Therefore, teachers are required to seek learning-based subjects, teaching-based subjects and curriculum-based subjects (Richards, 2015).

2. Research Methodology

2.1. Research Problem

The call for integrating professional development in the Moroccan educational system has been suggested since the introduction of the Moroccan National Charter for Education and Training in (2000) until the strategic version (2015-2030) came to light in 2015. The real driving forces of the need and importance of teachers' professional development are related to the factors that teachers find themselves stuck between responding to their learners' needs, the workforce demands and the challenge of sharpening their knowledge and skills to be on the same rhythm with the prerequisites of present and future requirements of their teaching career and that of educations in general as well. As far as the research problem of this study is concerned, one can say that despite the growing interest of both graduate students and in-service teachers in enrolling in the Applied Language Studies master program of Moulay Ismail University, according to the university administration, in addition to the good reputation of the program at the local and national level, less attention is paid to understanding and demystifying in-service teachers' views and perceptions of the impact of the Applied Language Studies on their professional development. Therefore, this study seeks to find how in-service teachers perceive the impact of the Master program of Applied Language Studies of Moulay Ismail University on their professional development.

2.2. Study Purpose

For a study to be valid and successful, the researcher must determine the purpose of conducting it in advance. As far as this study is concerned, it aims to explore the ways in which in-service teachers perceive the impact of the Applied Language Studies master program of Moulay Ismail University on their professional development.

2.3. Research Objectives

The following objectives guide the study:

- To identify in-service teachers' perceptions of the impact of the Applied Language Studies master program of Moulay Ismail University on their professional development.
- To determine the ways in which the Applied Language Studies master program of Moulay Ismail University impacts in-service teachers from a professional development perspective.
- To boil down to in-service teachers' challenges, suggestions and recommendations for potential improvement of the program.

2.4. Research Questions

The research questions that guide the study are:

- How do in-service teachers perceive the impact of the Applied Language Studies master program of Moulay Ismail University on their professional development?
- In what ways does the program affect in-service teachers' professional growth and development?
- What are the challenges faced by in-service teachers when dealing with the Applied Language Studies master program of Moulay Ismail University as a professional development experience?

2.5. Instrument and Participants

As the researcher intended to use the questionnaire as a research instrument to gather baseline information on the in-service teachers' overall perceptions of the impact of the ALS master program on their professional development, it is clear that a semi-structured questionnaire for this research study was designed and consequently used to gather data from the respondents. For the purpose of this research, the researcher chose to use a semi-structured questionnaire with open-ended questions. There were two sections in the questionnaire. The first section required the respondents to answer a number of questions that elicit some information on their background, such as their age and the length of teaching experience. The second section of the questionnaire comprised a combination of open-ended questions. The researcher's decision to ask several open-ended questions in the second section is well-supported by the literature as being useful in the event that the answers to these questions are unknown and when rich personal data is sought. Furthermore, the use of open-ended questions also enables the respondents to write a free account in their own terms to explain and qualify their responses and avoid the limitations of pre-set categories of responses (Cohen et al., 2007). The researcher also made an effort to limit the open-ended questions in the questionnaire, as Bryman (2008) warned that people are frequently put off by the prospect of having to write a lot.

As far as the sampling of this study is concerned, it was conducted with in-service teachers enrolled in the master's program of applied language studies at Moulay Ismail University, Faculty of Art and Humanities. Therefore, the study employs purposive sampling, especially convenience sampling, as a type of non-probability sampling. Convenience

sampling involves selecting participants based on specific criteria that are relevant to the research question. The use of Convenience sampling in this study is based on the idea of selecting in-service teachers who have already experienced or are enrolled in the master program of Applied Language Studies. This method is also useful to ensure that the sample includes teachers with specific characteristics or experiences that are relevant to the research questions of the study.

2.6. Data Analysis Procedures

The process of analyzing data qualitatively involves organizing, accounting for and interpreting the data. Additionally, qualitative data analysis is inductive in nature. Therefore, analytic induction is one of the best approaches to qualitative data analysis in research methodology (Bryman, 2008). In terms of the data analysis procedure adopted by the researcher for analyzing the data gathered, it was made clear that the researcher chose to use a thematic analysis. After collecting the data, the researcher analyzed the data using the thematic analysis method, where a researcher "Captures something important about the data in relation to the research question and represents some level of patterned response or meaning within the data set" (Braun & Clark, 2006, p. 82). After that, the researcher began the coding process by open-coding the data. Open coding is a process by which the researcher codes the data in general categories to generalize patterns from which themes emerge.

2.7. Results and Discussion

The current study's purpose focuses on exploring in-service teachers' perceptions of the impact of the Applied Language Studies master program of Moulay Ismail University on their professional development for the sake of examining their perspectives towards the impact of the program on their professional growth and career development. The researcher depended on in-service teachers who were enrolled in the ALS master program as the study samplers to gather data, and the semi-structured questionnaire was used as a research instrument. Additionally, the researcher used thematic analysis as a data analysis procedure. The semi-structured questions aligned with the research questions listed below:

- How do in-service teachers perceive the impact of the Applied Language Studies master program of Moulay Ismail University on their professional development?
- In what ways does the program affect in-service teachers' professional growth and career development?
- What are the challenges faced by in-service teachers when dealing with the Applied Language Studies master program of Moulay Ismail University as a professional development experience?

The data analysis procedure uncovered different themes based on the research questions. Seven themes emerged from the data analyzed, namely: attitude, opportunity, satisfaction, skills, high costs, stress and time. The themes of attitude, opportunity and satisfaction emerged from the first research question. Regarding this, the participants revealed that they have a positive attitude towards the impact of the Applied Language Studies master program on their professional development. Participants also state that the program is a real chance for them to develop professionally. The program is also a golden chance for them to pursue their studies in Ph.D. programs. In the same vein, respondents declared that their level of satisfaction with the content of the modules was very high.

Regarding the second research question, the theme that has emerged from the respondents' answers is "skills". Many in-service teachers stated that the program has enabled them to develop their research, communications and teaching skills as well. Concerning the third question of the study, three themes emerged after the data coding and analysis: high costs, stress and time. Most of the participants claimed that high costs were one of their biggest difficulties and challenges. Stress has also been considered a challenge for in-service teachers throughout this professional development experience. Additionally, the respondents stated that time was also a real challenge for them since they had to deal with duties as teachers and readings as well as preparing presentations as post-graduate students. Finally, the majority of the respondents shared some remarks, suggestions, and recommendations for future change.

2.7.1. Research Question 1

Research question number 1 aimed at discovering in-service teachers' perceptions towards the impact of the Applied Language Studies master program of Moulay Ismail University on their professional development. The results indicated that in-service teachers perceive the impact of the program on their professional development positively. The results also indicated that the content of the program responds to in-service teachers' professionalism. The results also showed that respondents consider the program a real chance for them to grow professionally and personally. These findings are supported by Hustler et al. (2003), who affirm that most teachers are satisfied with their professional development experiences. Therefore, teachers in general and in-service teachers in particular need to experience more professional development programs, especially master programs, as they have a great impact on their professional growth and career development.

2.7.2. Research Question 2

The second research question that the study is trying to find an answer to is aimed at finding out ways in which the program affects in-service teachers' professional growth and career development. The results that emerged from the analysis of the semi-structured questions related to it showed that the program has a great impact on in-service teachers' research, communication, teaching and critical thinking skills as well. In agreement with this, Harwell (2003) states that professional development deepens and expands teachers' knowledge of the subjects being taught. It also sharpens their teaching skills in the classroom and also helps them keep up with continuous developments

related to the field of education. Similarly, Opfer and Pedder (2010) and Boyle et al. (2004) also note that teachers' knowledge hones and improves after participating in professional development programs. These findings are also supported by Ravhuhali (2014), who stated that teachers perceive the importance of professional development as it enables them to acquire new ideas, more knowledge, and skills to teach the content of the subject matter in their classes effectively. This objective can be achieved only if teachers are furthering their studies. Additionally, Cranton (2003) stated that professional development should lead teachers to critically and analytically examine their teaching practices, select alternative practices, and discard practices.

2.7.3. Research Question 3

The third research question in this study focuses on the challenges and difficulties that in-service teachers faced during the two years of program. The analysis of the data collected from the questions related to this research question uncovers three main themes: high costs, stress and time. A very important challenge that has been faced by in-service teachers in this professional development experience, according to the result obtained in this study, is related to financial problems. In-service teachers stated that they encountered financial problems. Therefore, they are in need of financial support for professional development because of their poor salaries. Therefore, it is necessary for teachers to be well-paid for the professional development experiences they go through or to provide them with financial resources for their professional development participation. This barrier can be overcome, according to the researcher, if in-service teachers are financially supported for their professional development activities or a performance evaluation system can be established in which the salaries of teachers, in general, are to be paid according to their professional performance. If the professional development of teachers is financially supported, in this way, they can participate in different professional development programs and opportunities. This challenge was expected as it is consistent with research studies done internationally (Musingafiet al., 2015).

In the context of emotional stress, in-service teachers declared that stress was also a challenge for them. Balancing their work as in-service teachers and studying was stressful for them as they needed to cope with the workload from their schools, which included lesson preparation, marking homework, examination papers, and other administrative duties besides teaching and their studies.

Time stood as a real challenge for in-service teachers. Many of them stated that they found it difficult to cope with their duties as in-service teachers and the huge number of articles they had to read for each lecture, in addition to their preparation for the presentations assigned by their professors each weekend. Similarly, those who commute every weekend to Meknes to attend lectures suffered a lot with time. The findings also showed that some of the participants indicated the term family sacrifices several times. To put it differently, sacrificing time with family was a challenge for in-service English teachers who were working and studying at the same time. Therefore, as they must care for their families and children, time management and arrangement stood as a real problem. Furthermore, at the weekends, when teachers normally have to do some entertainment to get rid of the work stress, they find themselves obliged to go to Meknes to study and learn new things. Therefore, it was highly difficult for their families to understand and cope with the new changes. These findings are supported by Bawa (2016).

3. Recommendations

The following recommendations highlight the shortcomings of the Applied Language Studies master program of Moulay Ismail University, which call for additional procedures and regulations:

- First, decision-makers of the ALS master program should understand that in-service teachers are aware of their needs and requirements. Therefore, they should have a say in making decisions about what they want to learn and how they want to learn. In other words, decision-makers should adopt a bottom-up rather than a top-down approach and enable in-service teachers to become real partners in improving the program's quality at all levels and producing a successful outcome in the future.
- Second, decision-makers of the program should support and encourage teachers to enrol in the program by reducing costs and adopting other ways of learning, such as distance learning.
- Third, the university administration should encourage cooperation and collaboration with other universities at the national and international levels for the sake of opening the door for new professional development experiences for in-service teachers.
- Fourth, in-service teachers should be given more opportunities to develop new skills, such as organizing study days, seminars and conferences. Therefore, decision-makers should encourage in-service teachers to sharpen and develop those skills.
- Fifth, the university administration should adopt other ways of assessing in-service teachers' performance. The need to focus on assessing in-service teachers based on practical considerations rather than theory is of paramount importance.

4. Conclusion

The current study explores in-service teachers' perceptions of the impact of the ALS master program of Moulay Ismail University, Faculty of Arts and Humanities, on their professional development. In this regard, the findings revealed that in-service teachers perceive the impact of the ALS master program positively based on the idea that the program impacts their professional development in many different ways, including communication, research, and teaching skills. However, the study also has revealed that the road for in-service teachers during such a professional development experience was not paved roses. The challenges and difficulties that emerged from the analysis of the respondents'

answers should be taken into account to support in-service teachers' professional development. Similarly, the researcher's recommendations should also be taken into account for the sake of developing and improving the program's quality in general. The researcher stated different recommendations, among them enabling in-service teachers to become real partners in the process of improving the quality of the program through paying attention to their own suggestions and opinions and adopting alternative assessment as a way of objectively assessing in-service teachers' performance.

It is noteworthy that the current qualitative study that has been conducted for the sake of exploring in-service teachers' perceptions of the impact of ALS on their professional development is a real opportunity for future research about the issue of in-service teachers and professional development that could go deeper using quantitative data for better transparency and generalization. This is the first time that the Faculty of Arts and Humanities in Meknes has decided to launch this new version of the program to enable teachers who are eager to benefit from such a professional development experience to enroll and take part in. Therefore, this study remains the first and the only initiative to uncover in-service teachers' perceptions towards the impact of this program on their professional development. In other words, this is a very rich area of study and more research is still needed to uncover different research topics related to this research field.

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