

## From Sociocultural Epistemology to Transformative Pedagogy: Contributions of Collaborative Action Research through Dialogic Mediation in Teacher Professional Development

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### Abstract

The preparation of English teachers to teach is a complex and multitudinous undertaking. Traditionally, in line with positivist paradigm which has focused on notion of transfer, teacher education has been concerned with depositing bodies of pre-defined information to teachers and has considered teachers as that of knowledge consumers. As an alternative to traditional, transmission-based view of teacher education, action research has emerged as a practical tool to enhance meaningful second language (L2) teacher education. In line with the current epistemological shift, this study set out to examine the utility of collaborative action research, as a viable means, to boost teachers' professional development in a networked community of shared practice. To this end, 7 male and female Iranian English teachers, aged 22-35, were selected through convenient sampling from different universities in Iran. Having been added to a teacher training group in WhatsApp, the selected participants were exposed to online classes within which they learned to problematize a context-specific topic and were provided with relevant practical experiences through dialogic mediation. Having been taught to go through circles of action research throughout the treatment, the participants were required to complete an action research project. The data triangulated from four main sources (i.e., action research projects, teachers' professional journals, reflective journals, and semi-structured interviews), revealed that EFL teachers engaged in a collaborative dialogue in a networked community of shared knowledge appeared to sustain L2 professional development, transforming their pedagogical practice and feeling empowered to move toward a more emancipatory perspective. The findings have important implications for language teachers in general, and EFL teachers and syllabus designers, in particular.

**Keywords:** Collaborative Action Research, Dialogic Mediation, Professional Development

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## 1. Introduction

It goes without denial that the professional development of teachers plays a fundamental role in developing the efficiency of teaching practices and has long been a major locus of research (Avalos, 2011). The preparation of English teachers to teach is a complex and multitudinous undertaking. It is argued that teachers who participate in productive professional development programs are “better prepared to make the most effective curriculum and instructional decisions” (Vrasidas & Zembylas, 2004, p. 326). Consequently, second language (L2) teacher education has become a central issue in education literature (Wilson & Berne, 1999).

Over the past decades, the quintessence of epistemological foundation shaping L2 teacher education and teacher cognition have shifted dramatically (Yuan & Burns, 2016). This shift has not happened in a vacuum but has been continuously informed from epistemological shifts in how different intellectual doctrines have come to explicate human learning (Johnson, 2006). The major shift was from the dominant positivist epistemology toward an interpretive and sociocultural epistemological perspectives (Lantolf, 2000). Traditionally, in line with positivist paradigm which has focused on notion of transfer, teacher education has been concerned with depositing bodies of pre-defined information to teachers and has considered teachers as that of knowledge consumers (Borg, 2015). It has become apparent that positivist epistemology, with simplified, decontextualized nature of its underlying tenets and with no appreciation for complex social, historical, cultural, economic, and political dimensions, has done little to improve classroom teaching and learning (Johnson, 2009a). In a similar vein, transmission-based method of teacher education tends to transmit knowledge about teaching and learning in the form of theoretical readings, lectures, one-off training workshops and has no appreciation for teachers’ beliefs, values and experience (Abednia, 2012). There is, therefore, a general consensus among scholars in the field that such top-down approaches to teacher education has done little to maximize teachers’ professionalism (Richards, 2008; Richards & Farrell, 2005).

Interpretive epistemological perspective, which primarily emerged as a backlash against positivist paradigm, revolves around the assumption that “knowledge is socially constructed and emerges from the social practices that people engage in. Therefore, social reality is understood as being created by people, and exists, in large part, within people’s mind” (Johnson, 2009a, p. 9). In L2 teacher education, interpretive epistemology highlights the importance of ethnographic description based on observation and interviews as a means to explore why teachers teach the way they do and what they take

into account as they make decisions about the challenges of everyday classrooms (Johnson, 2006; 2009a). That is, from interpretive epistemology, “teachers’ prior experiences, their interpretations of the activities they engage in, and, most importantly, the contexts within which they work” are quite vital in formulating teachers’ underlying assumptions about intricacies of teaching and learning (Johnson, 2009a, p. 9). Despite the accumulating evidence that interpretive epistemology plays a significant role in facilitating professional development of language teachers, for Iranian EFL teachers who have been taught in traditional, teacher-led learning establishments, changing roles from that of mere “subjugated consumers of knowledge” to that of “emancipated transformers of knowledge” and “agents of change”, can be a difficult and frustrating experience.

## **2. Literature Review**

### **2.1. Sociocultural Perspective**

Sociocultural epistemology, as a combination of shifting epistemological perspectives, has drawn to a large extent from the work of Vygotsky (1978) and a number of his followers, perceives human learning, in essence, as a social activity deeply rooted in physical and social contexts (Johnson, 2006; Salomon, 1993). Sociocultural perspective perceives language as a social practice (Johnson, 2009a; 2009b; Lantolf, 2000), and plays as a viable means for mediating thinking (Johnson, 2009b; Vygotsky, 1978). Sociocultural perspective further argues that knowledge of the individuals is shaped and refined through the knowledge of the communities of practice (i.e., communities of shared knowledge/practice) within which the individuals participate (Johnson, 2009b; Wenger, 1998).

Taken to L2 teacher education, from sociocultural perspective, “neither education in general nor teaching in particular is about the transmission of specific bodies of knowledge and skills” (Johnson, 2009a, p. 62). As an alternative to traditional, transmission-based view of teaching, teaching is characterized as “a dialogic process of reconceptualizing and recontextualizing knowledge” (Johnson, 2009a, p. 62), ample with golden opportunities to experience and reflect upon everyday concepts (Johnson, 2006; 2009b). Hence, teacher education is depicted as an incremental process which emerges from social interactions in social contexts (Borg, 2013; Freeman & Johnson, 1998; Johnson, 2006).

Dialogic mediation, as the offshoot of sociocultural perspective, highlights the primacy of talk to facilitate learning (Alexander, 2008). In line with sociocultural perspective that perceives language as the bedrock of thinking and learning, dialogic mediation views talk as fundamental to

developing and systemizing our thoughts and reasons (Reznitakaya & Wilkinson, 2015). Using dialogic mediation in a community of shared knowledge gives learners a means to assimilate their intellectual resources, share experience, and solve dilemmas through a collective effort (Mercer & Littleton, 2007; Reznitakaya & Wilkinson, 2015). There is a general agreement that constructive professional development should take into account the collective participation of teachers in a supportive community of shared knowledge. However, in L2 professional development, far too little attention has been paid to dialogic mediation as a means to develop L2 teaching practice in Iran.

## **2.2. Action Research**

Current trends in L2 teacher education have recognized the importance of epistemology of practice; one which underscores the necessity of “ongoing, in-depth, and reflective examination of teaching practices” (Johnson, 2009b, p. 26) with further emphasis on legitimacy of practitioner knowledge (Brydon-Miller & Maguire, 2009; Burns, 2009; Johnson, 2006; 2009a; Richards, 2008). Given this, action research has emerged, as a practical tool, to legitimize practitioner knowledge by emphasizing the vitality of “reflection on and inquiry into teachers’ experiences as a mechanism for change in classroom practices” (Johnson, 2009b, p. 23).

Koshy (2005) defines action research as “a constructive enquiry, during which the researcher constructs his or her knowledge of specific issues through planning, acting, evaluating, refining and learning from the experience” (p. 9). Action research revolves around the popular belief that “local conditions vary widely and that solutions to many problems cannot be found in generalized truths that take no account of local conditions” (Ary, Jacobs, Sorensen, & Walker, 2014, p. 547). Given this, Bell (1999) highlights the pragmatic, practicable dimensions of action research which makes this research paradigm appealing to many practitioners in the field. Likewise, Cohen and Manion (1994) describe action research as “essentially an on-the-spot procedure designed to deal with a concrete problem located in an immediate situation” (p. 192).

Good teachers might subconsciously resort to some forms of action research (Mills, 2003). Action research is, however, a “systematic research approach that is cyclical in nature” revolving around action and reflection, enriching methods and interpretations of students’ behaviors” (Ary, Jacobs, Sorensen, & Walker, 2014, p. 548). That is, the researcher takes actions to improve the situation and deliberately monitors and records the aftermath of the actions (Burns, 2009).

The initial appreciation of action research stressed on its utility to enable and liberate participants through spiral of steps based on reflection and action (Burns, 2015). Nevertheless, more contemporary approaches to action research have underscored its invaluable contribution to a teacher's professional development through a systematic, step-wise practice (Burns, 1999, McDonough, 2006; Rainey, 2000).

Collaborative action research is an interactive process conducted by a group of researchers who grapples with similar challenges. Through collaboration, researchers which form a community of practice disentangle contextual issues from individual perspectives to enrich understanding (Dikilitas & Griffiths, 2017). Accordingly, Burns (1999) contends that "collaborative research offers opportunities for informal individual thinking to be transposed into more systematic and collective problem-solving" (p. 214). McNiff (2002) similarly underscored the centrality of collaboration, defined action research as "an enquiry by the self into the self, undertaken in company with others acting as research participants and critical learning partners" (p. 12).

### **2.3. Action Research in L2 Teacher Education**

Traditionally, L2 teacher education is perceived as short-term, one-shot training workshops conducted by outside experts who are in charge of disseminating a body of knowledge and skills (Cullen, 1997). Such teacher training programs are found to be unsatisfactory since neither provide the teachers with "opportunities to be actively involved in their development and to reflect on their teaching practices" (Atay, 2008, p. 139), nor take into account the contexts and situational factors that shape teachers' classroom practices (Burns, 2009).

In the last few decades, action research has cemented its place as a practical tool to enhance meaningful L2 teacher education. In recent decades, there has been an increasing interest in action research, but debate still continues about the extent of actual action research practice in L2 teacher education (Burns, 2010). In many countries, including Iran, the condition for teacher research is mostly unfavorable and action research is mainly flourished in countries where teachers are, professionally and financially, well supported (Burns, 2010). Rainey (2000) conducted a study with 228 teachers in 10 countries and found that 75.5 percent had never implemented action research. From the teachers who claimed to have encountered with action research, 75.9 percent claimed they had done action research individually as a prerequisite for professional development. Rainey further concluded that there is an urgent need for research training programs to integrate action research. Moreover, it is disappointing to know that the

number of conferences and articles that reflects on action research and attempts to bring together action researchers is relatively meagre (Rainey, 2000).

Yuan and Burns (2016) delved into identity construction of Chinese language teachers through action research. In collaboration with university teachers, 15 English teachers, from different schools in Beijing, participated in this study. Having instructed the theoretical and practical underpinnings of AR, the participants proceeded to problematize, design and implement AR to refine their practice. The findings of the study revealed that implementing action research influenced identity change in four major areas: perception about research, teaching practice, collaboration with colleagues, and sustained professional development by exercising as ‘agents of change’.

Wang and Zhang (2015) reported on the utility of a collaborative AR project conducted by a group of language teachers in order to boost teacher autonomy in a Chinese context in Beijing. The collaborative project consisted of 17 university researchers (Urs), 45 school teachers (STs) from 12 senior secondary schools. A cluster of activities was incorporated, including plenary workshops through dialogic mediation on theory and practice of AR, URs’ group meetings for exploring emerging themes and issues and collaborative STs’ activities supported by Urs. It was revealed that through dialogic mediation, the STs made drastic progress, became more autonomous and played a more pivotal role in subsequent stages.

McDonough (2006) investigated the implementation of action research projects in professional development of graduate teaching assistants (TAs). Seven graduate TAs were enrolled and were then assigned to a 15-week instruction program, 80-minutes classes per week. The instructions were presented through dialogic mediation. TA’s professional development was inspected through a quantitative analysis of multiple data types (e.g., professional journal, reflective essay, and action research project). The findings testified that TAs gained a much richer perspective of research and refined their teaching practices.

Crookes and Chandler (2001) integrated an action research program into an L2 teaching course. To this end, 13 graduate students in a master program at the University of Hawai were recruited. Reading materials and lectures revolving around the basic components of action research were amalgamated with the course syllabus, and the participants were required to conduct a collaborative research project concerning relevant L2 teaching themes. The data were collected through students’ journals, peer observation, questionnaires, interviews, and submitted oral and written reports. The participants’ perceptions about the course and their action research projects

were elicited. It was found that the action research project served beneficial purposes. Furthermore, students' journals assisted teachers to communicate with their students more efficiently.

Dikilitas and Yayli (2018) explored the professional development of Turkish teachers through action research. The participants developed action research projects over four years and had an opportunity to explore the development of their professional identities. The findings revealed four major themes in professional development: I) fostering accountability to students' needs, II) developing informed, systematic practice, III) becoming cognizant of self-development, and IV) increased inter-institutional collaboration which led to improved empathy among the participants.

In the light of the innumerable challenges that impede meaningful L2 professional development in Iran and foregoing arguments that integration of collaborative action research might have a positive impact on teachers' professional development, the following research question was proposed: How does implementing collaborative action research in a networked community of shared knowledge affect the professional development of Iranian EFL teachers?

### **3. Method**

#### **3.1. Participants**

In order to conduct this study, 13 male and female Iranian EFL teachers, aged 22-35, were selected through convenient sampling. The participants, who were Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL), were selected from different universities in Tehran, Kermanshah, Isfahan, Kerman, Abadan and Hamadan. APA ethical guidelines for subject selection and participation were observed. To this, informed consent and confidentiality were taken into account. It is, therefore, important to bear in mind that this study was entirely voluntary and the participants agreed to join eagerly. Although 13 EFL teachers agreed, at the beginning, to fully participate in this study, six of whom refused to fully cooperate were deleted from the final report. It was important to ensure that the data were not contaminated (i.e., those participants who had no long-term commitment were omitted) and the participants were encouraged to give their best effort. Given this, a group of seven male and female participants without any history of attending in any teacher professional program was drawn from a pool of Iranian EFL teachers. Of the final cohort of seven teachers, two were male and five were female. Their educational background were B.A. and M.A.

## **3.2. Materials and Instruments**

### *3.2.1. Action Research Project*

The participants were told to propose contextualized topics revolved around their L2 pedagogical practices (e.g., issues with regard to incorporating different techniques, implementing curricular innovations, teaching grammar, enhancing class participation, etc.). The participants had a good deal of opportunities to consult and receive peer and teacher feedback at all phases of research process. The EFL teachers were given clear guidelines to satisfy their action research requirements. The action research project sheet was adopted from Hong and Lawrence (2011) which, arguably, serves as a clear, sweeping framework for developing action research projects. The action research project sheet provides an overview of the information that the participants should integrate into the project (e.g., thick description of the context, elucidation of student work, reflection on the process and practices). The framework provides a stepwise structure to develop action research projects and incorporates the following main stages: (1) Identify the problem, (2) Description of the context, (3) Research/Resources, (4) Evidence of student outcome, (5) Weekly reflections, (6) Data Collection. Each step takes into account rich, clear guidelines to illuminate research processes. The participants were instructed on how to conduct action research projects.

### *3.2.2. Reflective Journal*

The participants were required to write a short narrative of their professional development at the end of the treatment. They were encouraged to carefully ponder over their professional journal entries or action research project and reflect on how they developed throughout the treatment sessions. This reflective essay varied from two to four pages in length. The participants were informed that it was not mandatory to compose reflective essays in English.

To ensure that the submitted essays would not be either short or irrelevant which might seriously put the accuracy of data in jeopardy, a list of important questions were formulated to guide the participants. The participants were encouraged to write a comprehensive, clearly-planned essay and also address the questions in their essays. Nevertheless, some reflective essays were fraught with permissiveness. To come up with more authentic and accurate data, those reflective essays which failed to meet the expectations were immediately returned for further revisions.

### 3.2.3. *Professional Journal*

The participants of this study were required to record their thoughts and reflections about collaborative online AR classes, AR projects, the courses, and their L2 professional development. They were asked to write an entry with the average length of 100 words each week. The participants were not obliged to compose professional journals in English. They were advocated to provide a detailed description either in English or in Persian. Each participant composed from 5 to 7 entries in the professional journal.

Initially, the participants were freely allowed to go through online classes, share their thoughts and perceptions about the context, the materials, and their L2 professional development. However, the returned entries were found to be either short or partially irrelevant to what the researcher aimed to inquire about. In order to guide the participants to be clearly informative about different aspects of the study and minimize either redundancy or inconsistency of the data, the participants were told to record their thoughts and feeling about pre-defined issues. To do so, a taxonomy of important issues with regard to online professional development classes was provided and was emailed to the participants. Then, the participants were required to write their entries based on the pre-defined issues. To help participants fully appreciate the points, each pre-defined issue was supplied with clear-cut explanation to avoid any misunderstandings in writing the entries. The issues revolved around a rich, diverse range of topics, from the courses and interactions among the participants to novelty and practicality of instructions. The entries were carefully scrutinized and were returned if failed to meet the expectations.

### 3.2.4. *Semi-structured Interview*

The participants' perceptions about collaborative online AR classes, the courses, the community of shared knowledge, and their professional development were inquired formally through semi-structured interviews before and after the treatments. In this study, all teachers were interviewed using an interview schedule. The interview was conducted in English. However, some teachers shifted to Persian during the interview. It was a semi-structured, open-ended format that lasted about 15 minutes. It is important to note that immediately after conducting the interview, the very first impression of the interview was jotted down in a reflection log by the researcher.

## 3.3. **Procedures**

In order to conduct this study, 13 male and female EFL teachers, aged 22-35, were selected through convenience sampling from different

universities in Iran. In order to sample a geographically diverse range of participants, the internet advertisement was the main informing tool. After careful analysis of the demographic forms, those eligible participants who could fulfill the requirements of the study were selected. Moreover, those inattentive participants who did not fully cooperate throughout the study were omitted from the final cohort. Therefore, the data were collected from 7 male and female participants. Next, the selected participants were added to a teacher professional development group in WhatsApp.

Next, the teacher educator, in advance, through negotiation with experts in the field, painstakingly selected the necessary materials which served as the teacher training courses to be taught to the EFL teachers in online classes. The selected materials consisted of a variety of instructional audio podcasts, videos of classroom practice, teacher books, teacher professional development materials, research textbooks, pedagogical techniques, and action research materials. The EFL teachers were exposed to the above-mentioned materials on their mobile phones via WhatsApp during a five month teacher-training project.

The online classes began with plenary debate, mostly in the form of workshops through problematizing a particular topic which was directly linked to teachers' actual teaching experience (i.e., what problems do you usually have in your listening classes?). The participants were encouraged to share their opinions, engaged in a collaborative, critical debate by means of which different aspects of a particular topic were touched upon in every online session. Then, the researcher posted useful materials (e.g., usually short videos of classroom practice by experts in the field) concerning the issue just problematized. This was followed by further plenary debates and exchanging feedbacks. Having taught to go through circles of action research throughout the treatment, the participants were encouraged to make action plans and implemented their plans in their classes to address a problem. That is, they were taught to go through circles of action research starting with identifying a problem, reflection and investigation, making action plans, implementation of action plans, analysis and reflection. The online classes were held two times a week for a total of roughly two hours per week.

After the treatments, the participants composed a reflective essay and elaborated their professional development throughout the treatment sessions. In order to clarify the participants' perceptions about collaborative online AR classes and their L2 professional development, a semi-structured interview was also conducted. Finally, action research projects were emailed to the teacher educator after the online classes.

### 3.4. Data Analysis

The data from four different sources (i.e., reflective essays, action research project, professional journals, and semi-structured interviews) were analyzed. During the online professional development classes, the researcher made some field notes to consolidate the findings along with the EFL teachers' valuable comments. This allowed for constant comparison given the fact that grounded theory relies on a simultaneous method of data collection and analysis.

Grounded Theory was employed in this phase of the study since the ontology of Grounded Theory was in accordance with the theoretical assumption of the study. As Charmaz and Belgrave (2012) argued, in order to complete process of data analysis in Grounded Theory, data must be "systematically organized, continually scrutinized, accurately described, theorized, interpreted, discussed and presented" (p. 95). It is worth mentioning that the four stages of open coding, axial coding, selective coding and developing exploratory model are not linear and work as spiral, overlapping phenomenon.

In this study, the accumulated data from the above-mentioned sources were coded and then inductively analyzed for themes. For thermalizing the data, Straussian Framework was implemented. To this end, MAXQDA analysis software was utilized. After each source was analyzed inductively, a cross-source comparison was undertaken. This allowed for exact analysis and interpretation of the themes and patterns that emerged. By implementing a multiple source study design, the generalizability and the validity of the findings were enhanced. The researcher read the texts and the data were coded and sub-coded. Having read the entire corpus, the inductive approach was implemented through which the themes started to emerge from the data. The coding procedures were as follows:

**I. Stage One: Open Coding.** This stage involved allocating each paragraph of raw textual data (from reflective essays, field notes, professional journals, and semi-structured interviews) a label or concept category that eventually helped to extract and generate themes. Open coding was carried out to capture different aspects of professional development of Iranian EFL teachers in a networked community of shared practice. In this stage, twelve different codes were developed, e.g., *refined practice*, *reflective scrutiny*, *higher involvement*, *systematic reflection*, *improved research skills*, *change (in L2 practice)*, *higher-level of motivation*, *sound understanding of research*, *demythifying research*, *meaningful collaboration*, *personal and professional upheaval*, *develop sense of awareness*, *liberal*, *incentives to grow professionally*, *reform*, *improved understanding*, *socially-constructed*,

*challenging status quo*, etc. Some of these codes were later omitted, revised, modified, or added at the second stage. Only “major themes” survived.

**II) Stage Two: Axial Coding.** The next stage entailed the analysis of potential interfaces and linkages between some of the emerging themes. Through constant comparison across different data, emergent themes were continuously mined. The main goal was incorporating, classifying, and designating sub themes into larger thematic categories. Through thematic connections, four major emergent categories were identified: *Perception about research, transformative pedagogy, reflective inquiry, and empowerment*.

**III) Stage Three: Selective Coding.** This stage entailed achieving higher level of abstraction and developing a theoretical model. According to Haig (1995), constant comparison and spiral relationship with theory can lead to higher level of abstraction through which a systematic review of the data is carried out to develop a specific category. This stage entails the consolidation of the four significant themes into an overarching framework.

## 4. Results and Discussion

### 4.1. Results

Analysis of the data accumulated from four different data collection tools (i.e., gathered from reflective essays, field notes, professional journals, and semi-structured interviews) revealed that implementing critical collaborative action research in a networked community of shared practice had a lasting impact on professional development of Iranian EFL teachers. The findings revealed that critical collaborative action research in a networked community of shared knowledge might develop EFL teachers’ professional development in four main areas, two of which are targeted in this study:

- Transformative Pedagogy
- Empowerment

#### 4.1.1. Transformative Pedagogy

The first theme that emerged in the data was the development of teaching practice through implementation of collaborative action research in a networked community of shared knowledge. The coding procedure which entailed open, axial, and selective coding was undertaken. Through inductive approach, the following initial themes were identified: *refined practice, improved teaching skills, critical pedagogy, dialogic pedagogy, improved understanding, peer coaching, collaborative pedagogy, transformation*. As

was mentioned before, after identifying initial themes, they were grouped. Some of the themes were merged, renamed, or discarded. Through constant data analysis and verification, three segments were selected: dialogic pedagogy, refined practice, and critical pedagogy.

**I) Dialogic Pedagogy.** One of the findings that emerged from the data was “dialogic pedagogy” or learning to teach through dialogue. Most of the EFL teachers pointed out that they were able to pursue professional development through regular, innumerable opportunities for dialogue with colleagues in the networked community of shared knowledge.

Communicative interactions among members boosted my teaching practice in general, and theoretical knowledge, in particular. I learned how to effectively teach a particular skill through critical dialogues with members in the group (Teacher F, Reflective essay).

Teacher C believed that dialogic engagement enabled EFL teachers to clarify, exemplify, expand, critique, or justify ideas. This, in turn, enabled the participants to move away from the monologic toward the dialogic contributions:

My engagement with teachers enhanced my pedagogical skills. Through dialogues, we learned to probe teachers’ thinking and understanding. I never felt dominated since I could oppose or acknowledge ideas. (Teacher C, interview)

Through cumulative adaptation/adoption of ideas, the participants were able to benefit from others’ ideas and connect them to coherent lines of thinking and enquiry:

The teachers learned to build on their own and each other’s ideas and continue professional development on a regular basis. (Teacher A, professional journal)

**II) Refined Practice.** The EFL teachers also stated that completing action research through collaborative practice in the community of shared knowledge refined their pedagogical practice. The participants incorporated new teaching practices in response to the insights they gained through dialogic pedagogy, self-reflection, and peer feedback. Teacher B is an English teacher in a high school in Hamadan. His main starting point for action research project was his negative feelings about the oral performance of his students. He had an innumerable questions and doubts about this aspect of his teaching. He spent countless hours to find out how he could improve his teaching.

What makes me feel so disappointed is when I see my students struggle to improve their speaking ability. They continue to make the same errors, they seem unable to express themselves adequately and continue to have little gain after two terms.

To understand the nature of the problem, he started to collect information through keeping a diary, giving students a questionnaire, and receiving students' written feedbacks after the oral test.

The data gave me an image which was far cry from the idea I had in my mind as an effective teacher. There was a huge gap between my intention to facilitate students' responses and what was actually happening. (Teacher B, reflective essay)

As a result, through dialogic practice and consultation with his colleagues, he implemented different strategies to refine his teaching practice. He believed greater understanding resulted in much better teaching practice:

I have much greater awareness of my students' lacks and needs and above all a greater understanding of my entity, as a teacher. Through reflection and constant observation, I see more clearly the complexities of communicative exchanges.

Teacher C believed through action research, she developed a fine-tuned understanding of her teaching practice and her students which gave her a motivation to constantly strive for greater teaching efficiency:

The major impact of action research is that it made me think more about teaching. When students didn't do well, I used to blame them for not putting in enough effort. Action research, however, made me appreciate the significant role of teachers, not only as distributors of knowledge, but also a person who can facilitate change through more refined practice. (Teacher C, professional journal)

**III) Critical Pedagogy.** Another important theme which emerged in this study was "changed view of teaching". By joining in the present study, the EFL teachers received not only systematic instruction on how to carry out an action research project, but also transformation to what is commonly known as "critical pedagogy". By completing action research project through a collaborative practice, the teachers were able to transcend beyond their common teaching practice toward critical pedagogy whereby they became more learner-centered and began to shift from a concern for their own teaching to addressing students' interests, needs, and empowering learners. This was reflected in some of the comments made by EFL teachers from semi-structured interview or professional journal reports:

Action research project has transformed, or I can say, reshaped my perspectives, my principles, and the way I see teaching. To me, students have the right to question, to critique, why not? I believe, they know what is wrong in our classes. Give them a chance to speak out! (Teacher E, interview)

I feel, as a conscientious teacher, the educational system is also to blame for many inadequacies, for students' low achievements. Me, as a teacher, is also accountable. We could have much better teaching outcomes if we work to the best of our teaching potentials. (Teacher A, interview)

The participants frequently expressed their discontentment with themselves, their teaching methodologies, and their narrow understanding of learner problems. Trying to address more students' lacks and needs was rather unsettling, nevertheless fostered a sense of awareness and an urge to respect student' rights and dignity.

#### 4.1.2. Empowerment

The second theme which emerged in this study was the empowerment of the participating EFL teachers which happened to have different dimensions. As was mentioned before, after identifying the initial themes, the researcher went through the corpus again to extract codes that served as a good piece of evidence for each theme. The following initial themes were identified: *motivation to grow professionally, challenging status quo, voice, praxis, multivocality, autonomy, personal and professional development, collaboration*. As more and more information accumulated, the initial themes were refined, renamed, or merged into a particular category. As an example, *motivation to continue self-directed professional development* was renamed to *incentives to grow professionally*. After constant comparison, the following sub-themes were selected: *incentives to grow professionally, voice, collaboration, and multivocality*.

**I) Incentives to Grow Professionally.** Most of the participants reported that they continue to work on their professional development after the online classes. Teacher A who was an M.A. student confirmed that she would expand her action research project into an M.A. thesis:

I will continue to work on my action research project to form a good topic for my future thesis. (Teacher A, Reflective Journal).

Teacher F believed that online classes which ultimately culminated in developing action research project had a lasting impact on her self-directed professional development. She also stated that she will continue to use techniques she had acquired throughout online classes to refine her practice:

This course motivated me to continue my professional development by searching for more professional development materials, writing action research projects, and reviewing some of my academic textbooks. Now, I have seen that I can actually improve my practice by sticking to action research cycle and more informed, reflective practice. (Teacher F, Reflective Journal)

**II) Emic Voice.** The second sub-theme which emerged through implementing collaborative action research was the EFL teachers' development of 'emic voice'. That is, EFL teachers observed that completing action research projects through collaborative practice in a networked community of shared knowledge enabled them to play a pivotal role in planning, implementing, and reporting pedagogical research:

Action research gave me a chance to implement my philosophy in my classes. Instead of blindly following what others say, I can theorize and report my findings. (Teacher A, interview)

Action research empowered participating teachers to challenge the status quo and moved beyond from holding an attitude of compliance toward a more emancipatory perspective. Initially, they were not able to incorporate critical perspective in order to voice their own ideas:

As a teacher, I am commonly told to follow the rules, not to interfere with the decisions, and operate the class based on pre-defined lesson plans which are issued by supervisor at the beginning of every term. (Teacher C, interview)

The institute where I teach is one of the most popular institutes in Isfahan. It has many branches in Iran. The authorities frequently say we have expert supervisors and policy makers in our command. They know best. Once I tried to challenge an opinion, they didn't take my idea seriously. I felt shattered. (Teacher D, interview)

However, after completion of action research projects, the participants expressed a shift in their perspectives toward institutional regulations and constraints:

I have been with my students for two terms. I know my students lacks and needs and I can select a method or strategy which suits them best. (Teacher C, professional journal)

**III) Collaboration.** The third sub-theme which emerged from the data was that the EFL teachers expressed their appreciation for collaborative contributions in online classes. EFL teacher commonly believed that through

collaborative practice and dissemination of different perspectives and insights into the issues, they could enrich their pedagogical practice:

It happened to me several times when other members challenged me, added extra information to what I said and even contradicted me. (Teacher F, reflective essay)

Collaborative practice throughout online classes was arguably a true asset to improving one's teaching practice. (Researcher, field note)

Through collaborative practice, the participating teachers could plan for what had been problematized:

Discussions with my group members have not only helped me overcome some specific challenges related to my classroom practice, but also changed my deeply-rooted perceptions about language teaching and learning. Above all, such honest collaboration has been such a huge emotional support to conduct research for very first time in my life. (Teacher C, professional journal)

**IV) Multivocality.** The final sub-theme which emerged in this study was the development of multilogues or multivocalic discourse structure after the completion of action research projects. The participating teachers stated that constant observations, thick reflections, planning, and re-planning enabled them to know their students' lacks and needs and started to exercise partial supervision or leave some responsibilities to their students and move toward dialogic problem-solving. As revealed by the data collected from the participants, almost all participating teachers confirmed that their understanding of their responsibilities as an EFL teacher had changed and they perceived their role as agents of change:

I used to believe that a language teacher's main concern hinged upon the development of different language skills. However, I have reached to this point that I have more important obligations than just enhancing students' language proficiency. Good teachers can shape learners' minds and have a great impact on the life of learners. (Teacher E, interview)

One of the most recurring themes was the recognition of students' voice and nurturing multilogic classroom discourse in which both teachers and students can express their own concerns and expectations.

Many people have misunderstood teachers' role in our society. Teachers are not only transmitters of knowledge, rather I believe they should engage students in meaningful, bilateral discussions to foster

their critical understanding of those issues. (Teacher C, professional journal)

I do my best to decipher my students' feelings, perceptions, and problems. If there is a problem, I talk to them after the class.

Teacher B also believes that teachers should take a critical stance to voice unequal distribution of power among those quality language teachers whose voice have been marginalized or silenced:

One of the obstacles that we should overcome in our society is the unequal distribution of power in our educational system. Our educational system is unfair, not only for our students but also for our teachers. Teachers should be credited for their constant effort to continue professional development, something which is totally ignored in our schools today.

#### **4.2. Discussion**

The findings of this study demonstrated that engagement in a collaborative practice to conduct action research project has the potential to establish dialogic pedagogy whereby participating teacher can share their invaluable experiences and refine their practice through dialogue. The teachers pointed out that action research projects helped them in building supportive, collaborative mentor-mentee relationship. That is, collaborative action research in a networked community of shared knowledge provided a good deal of opportunities for meaningful, rich, and focused dialogues about teaching and learning. The participants found such constructive feedbacks beneficial in developing a productive and informative teaching relationship. This corroborates the findings of the previous works in this field (e.g., Levin & Rock, 2003; McDonough, 2006).

Dialogic engagement not only enabled EFL teachers to refine their practice, but also promoted collaborative contributions in online classes. According to Clark et al. (1996), dialogue, because of its emphasis on full, meaningful participation, is the bedrock of collaborative research. However, as reminded by Little (1987), dialogic engagement should be more than just social and moral support. That is, professional support is fundamental in communities of shared knowledge. Likewise, Steiner, Weber and Minnis (1998) argued that unless dialogic engagement is "linked to participants' values, shared objectives, and common work, the result is not necessarily collaboration" (p. 775). In a similar vein, MacNiff (2002) argued that choices of identity and collaboration can take place through appreciating another's point of view. This, not only improves harmony and consensus, but also creates a safe environment for negotiating differences and tolerance.

The finding of this study indicate that implementing action research through collaborative practice promoted transformative pedagogy among the participants. Transformative pedagogy is not about radically altering and modifying the whole educational system of Iran. Even a minor change in the ideology and perception of language teachers could be counted as transformation. This transformation is promoted through action research project, dialogue and collaboration between researchers and classroom teachers, aiming to develop “a link between the micro-level of classroom practice and the macro-level of society at large” (Locke, Alcorn, & O’Neill, 2013, p. 112). This finding is in agreement with Tavakoli and Sadeghi’s (2011) findings which suggested that:

We do admit that our project did not trigger a change in the macro-context of our society by turning it into a Utopia, but we hope one day this butterfly effect may bring about changes in our society and make it a better place in which to live. (p. 368)

This belief is akin to the earliest quest of action research, which had its roots not in language teaching, but in teacher education at large (Dewey, 1929). This notion is further acknowledged by Carr and Kemmis (1986) who did not perceive action research as a mechanistic process whereby teachers simply target a problem and solve it, rather they wished to see the expansion of a cyclical plan of reform whose results are the output of a reflective process and are continuously refined by a community of collaborative action researchers. This was the collaborative, reflective community of shared practice that Freire (1970) and Stenhouse (1975) proposed in their quest for ‘reflection and action in order to reform’ (White, 1988).

Another important finding of this study was the EFL teachers’ development of “emic voice”. This finding accords with earlier findings of many scholars (e.g., Burns, 2015, Crookes & Chandler, 2001; McDonough, 2006; Sayer, 2005) that conducting collaborative action research empowered teachers to move from subjugation to emancipation. It is, therefore, argued that the essence of collaborative action research is power and voice bestowed to novice teachers to disseminate their practice (Mitchell, Reilly, & Logue, 2009). This finding also confirms Kumaravadivelu’s (2003) delineation of practicality which encourages “teachers to theorize from their practice and to practice what they theorize” (p. 37).

Some scholars (Levin & Rock, 2003; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Tavakoli & Sadeghi, 2011) claim that the major theme of collaborative action research is to transcend beyond its theoretical underpinnings for emancipation and implement tangible reforms. However, how EFL teachers can act as an agent of social change while the social macro-structure serves as a barrier and

obviate any social/educational change? The researcher found that although he did not bring about significant change in the outside world, he fulfilled his responsibility by “raising consciousness of his participants” and enabled them to express their voice. Likewise, Dikilitias and Griffiths (2017) believe that the major goal of collaborative action research is “to contribute to professional development through developing awareness, knowledge, and practice” (p. 8).

## **5. Conclusion and Implications**

From the findings of this study, it can be concluded that establishing a professional working relationship that treasures collaborative engagement and honest dialogue could promote EFL teachers professional development. Researchers and reform advocates argue that participation in community of shared practice is the integral factor in sustaining professional development. It is, however, worthwhile to state that teacher professionalism can be exigent and continuous, so it seems to be very challenging to clearly argue the outcomes which do not yield to precise measurement.

In conclusion, in sharp contrast to what is commonly claimed in traditional views of teacher professional development programs in short seminars and workshops, developing action research projects in a community of shared knowledge has the potential to develop a sense of emancipation and more refined pedagogical and theoretical knowledge. To this, closer collaboration with researcher, thick reflection on current challenges and practices, and recognizing the need for self-development seem to be vital.

The findings of this study have important implications for language teachers in general, and EFL language teachers, and syllabus designers, in particular. The education system and teacher training colleges should establish a workable, fair system of rewards for language teachers to receive credit for their effort to continue professional development through conducting action research projects. It is, however, important to note that the process of developing action research project, either in a networked or a non-networked community of shared knowledge, is an energy-sapping, time-consuming process requiring persistence and dedication. A number of conditions are deemed critical for the successful collaboration between the researcher and the participants such as honest and ongoing negotiation and collaboration among all the participants, developing trust, respect, and mutual understanding in a community of shared knowledge. Given this, access to social support is vitally important to help language teachers cope with stressful situation and regain their emotional-mental health. It is a reminder that participating teachers should work in a stress-free environment where every teacher can freely work with the mentor. Additionally, it would not go

amiss if teaching assistants be recruited to solve any potential dilemma. Last but not least, there is always room for an ongoing discussion of collaborative action research, from the very outset of planning of appropriate action research project to development of appropriate research instruments to explore teachers' professional development.

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