

Teacher education

EFL teachers' perceptions about an online CALL training. A case from Turkey

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Abstract

This paper examined a group of Turkish EFL in-service teachers' perceptions about a four-week online CALL training they received on a voluntary basis. The data were collected via a background questionnaire, interviews and reflection reports written by the participating teachers. Findings demonstrated that online CALL training was beneficial for the teachers since they gained familiarity with cutting-edge CALL technologies and developed ideas about how to use them in their classes. CALL learning in cyberspace, however, was found to be too challenging for some teachers devoid of the computer skills needed to manage the online experience. Most of the teachers also expected the CALL training to be situated in their classroom contexts providing them with ample opportunities to learn and apply CALL in their local teaching contexts. Taking the various needs of the teachers into consideration, the researcher came up with suggestions for future initiatives for in-service CALL teacher education.

Keywords: Computer-assisted language learning, in-service teacher education, online training, technology integration.

1. Introduction

CALL and teacher education, as an alluring area of research, have been gaining wide attention and been the focus of an ever-mounting body of research in the last decade. Due to the epoch-making development of ICT and its huge implications for teaching and learning foreign/second languages, there has been a high demand for training technology-savvy teachers who have "sufficient grounding in CALL theory and practice" (Stockwell, 2009, p.1) and can make informed decisions about implementing CALL in optimal ways in their own language teaching contexts. Additionally, there is now an indispensable need to train language teachers on how to use CALL effectively since "technology has become integral to the ways in which L2 professionals teach, create materials and even the way they conceptualize the profession in the 21st century" (Chapelle & Hegelheimer, 2004, p.300).

As one of the approaches to CALL teacher education (Hubbard, 2008), some of the studies (e.g. Bauer-Ramazani, 2006) focused on online training of language teachers. The rationale behind online CALL training is supported by previous work which shows that the online approach to teacher training is quite practical (Hubbard, 2008) and enables the linking of teacher populations (Egbert, 2006). In an online pre-service CALL course in a teacher education program, Bauer-Ramazani (2006) showed that the interactive and collaborative nature of the online course along with the authenticity of the learning activities helped pre-service teachers to form an online community of learners, develop CALL related technical and pedagogical knowledge and skills and gain ideas about how to adjust these skills to different learning and teaching situations. In an online CALL course which linked pre-service and in-service teachers through a Web-based platform, Egbert (2006) suggested that the online experience allowed both

parties to learn about CALL in authentic contexts and gain familiarity with distance technologies as they use it in the online course. Similarly, in a project that prepared language teachers for online teaching, Ernest et al. (2013) stressed the importance of teachers' 'hands-on experience of online collaboration' in an online teacher training in order for these teachers to create collaborative learning opportunities for their learners. Despite these various advantages, however, online teacher training has not been practiced widely in CALL teacher education especially for the training of in-service language teachers, which is a gap in the literature and deserves more attention. To this end, this study aims to explore the perceptions of a group of Turkish EFL in-service teachers about a four-week online CALL training with the following research question:

What are a group of Turkish EFL teachers' perceptions of an online in-service CALL training?

2. The study

The participants were 8 Turkish EFL teachers who worked at different state high schools located in a certain district in the capital city Ankara, Turkey. They were recruited based on convenience sampling since they participated in the training voluntarily upon receiving an invitation e-mail by the trainers. The profile of the teachers, who were given pseudonyms, is reflected in Table 1 below.

Table 1. The teachers' profiles.

Name	Gender	Age	Years teaching
Fatma	F	50	23
Gönül	F	47	32
Melek	F	47	18
Sevil	F	49	19
Ahmet	M	45	21
Nevin	F	37	12
Cemre	F	40	15
Göknur	F	38	15

As shown in the above table elicited from a background questionnaire, there were seven female teachers and one male teacher, whose ages ranged between 37 and 50. The teacher with least teaching experience had taught for 15 years while the most experienced teacher had 32 years of teaching experience. Only one teacher held an MA degree in ELT, and only one of the teachers had taken a training course in educational technology beforehand. All of the teachers reported using a computer in their personal lives at least a few times a week. Except for two of the teachers who did not have any computer or computer lab at school, the remaining teachers had a computer and overhead projector in their classes, which they used for instructional purposes in different measures but on average for 3 days per week.

3. The delivery of the "Online Training on Using Technology in L2 Classes"

For the design of the training, the researcher followed "The seven principles of good practice: a practical approach to evaluating online courses" by Çağıltay, Graham, Lim, Craner and Duffy (2001). The CALL training, which was completely online, lasted for 4 weeks. Before the training started, there was a pre-training week for meeting with the participants and introducing the communication tools. For successful completion of the training the participating teachers were required to do weekly tasks. These included

attending the live session in WizIQ, using the asynchronous platform Edmodo to share the digital materials they created for that week and writing a reflection report about their CALL learning in their blogs.

3.1. Communication tools of the training

The following tools were used:

- ® *Pbworks*: A wiki page was created as the main medium of information about the content, syllabus and tasks of the online training. The wiki involved a welcome message addressing the teachers, biodata about the trainers, syllabus, communication tools, weekly tasks, deadlines and also information about technology support.
- E-mail: Throughout the training, e-mailing was mainly used to remind the teachers of weekly tasks and deadlines, provide them with the links to the live sessions and to the recordings of these sessions.
- ® *Edmodo*: Through this platform, the teachers were required to turn in their assignments, post the links of their blogs to share their reflection reports and also write about the technological problems they encountered to get help from trainers or other teachers. Teachers were also encouraged to use Edmodo for asking questions, sharing comments, teaching materials and so on.
- ® *WizIQ*: This platform was used as the main medium for content delivery. Every week, the trainers scheduled live classes on two different days with the same content to introduce some technological tools and discuss their potential to be used in language classes with the teachers.
- ® *Wordpress*: The teachers set up their individual blogs as one of the first week's tasks and started to use these blogs for writing reflection reports, which were also shared with other teachers.
- Mobile phone: The researcher-trainer also gave her phone number to the teachers and encouraged them to call her when they needed additional help.

4. Instruments

4.1. Background questionnaire

In a background questionnaire, the teachers were asked about their teaching and educational background, personal use of technology, the availability of technological infrastructure in their schools and their own use of technology in their classrooms.

4.2. Interview

The interview questions were aimed at investigating the teachers' perceptions about the online CALL training. These questions were prepared by the researcher, who received expert opinions from 3 teacher educators who excel in CALL to check the validity of the questions. Semi-structured interviews were made in Turkish in order to create a more natural and comfortable environment for the teachers.

4.3. Reflection reports

The teachers were asked to write a reflection report in their blogs every week by elaborating on their CALL learning experience during the four-week period of the online training. These reports aimed at revealing information about the teachers' ideas about the training and possible ways of integrating the CALL tools into their own classroom. The teachers were given some guidance questions to refer to in the reports.

5. Data analysis

The interviews were audio recorded with the researchers' digital recorder, transcribed, translated from Turkish to English and later coded by the researcher. For the analysis of data, the researcher conducted content analysis. To identify recurrent themes, the researcher worked through the data set from the interviews and blog reports in tandem, and grouped the recurrent instances into categories through a coding procedure. For reliability, this coding procedure was carried out by two researchers who worked

individually first and later re-examined the codes by comparing and rearranging them into final categories.

6. Findings

The analysis of the data revealed three main categories regarding teachers' perceptions of the online CALL training. These categories were (a) success factors in an online CALL training (b) participating teachers' stated contributions to the training (c) their suggestions for improving the training.

6.1. Success factors in an online CALL training

The researcher identified two factors as necessary for the success of an online CALL training. These factors were related to (a) participant characteristics (b) design elements of the training.

6.2. Participant characteristics

The majority of the teachers stated that they faced many difficulties during the online training and as a result, planned to leave the training especially in the first week. According to these teachers, these difficulties were mainly due to their lack of competence in using computers, as expressed by two of the teachers below:

I had many difficulties. These difficulties were mostly due to my computer skills. I am not good at using the computer. The training sessions were so challenging for me. In the first session, I used two computers at the same time. I copied the links you gave in the chat board to the other computer. As time passed I learnt there was no need for this. I got help from my daughter. She was with me during the training sessions. I could also do the tasks with her help. (Sevil)

The first session was the worst. You shared your screen on WizIQ and I could not write on the chat board. That moment, I thought I should leave the training. The training was above my level. I got help from my husband. I could not do some of the tasks on my own. I need to spend so much time and energy. I also phoned Sevil when I could not manage things during the training. (Nevin)

The remaining teachers who said they did not encounter many problems or at least managed to cope with the problems, indicated that they benefited greatly from their personal use of computer and the internet frequently in their daily lives, which was also found in the questionnaire data showing that these teachers used a computer 5 or more times a week.

I have been an internet user for years. I always google things when I want to learn about something. I think this was a great advantage for me. If I did not use internet frequently I would not be capable of using WizIQ or Edmodo. (Cemre)

At first, everything was so new to me. I felt very nervous. But I thought that I am familiar with these things. I use internet. If I am capable of using internet, I should be able to use these things, as well. But if I were not familiar with internet, this stuff would be hard. (Fatma)

Four of the teachers attributed the challenges of the online training to the lack of prior experience with using technology in their own classes. The following quote is from a teacher who did not have any experience of using technology in her classes mostly due to the lack of infrastructure and to whom even the concept of using technology in language classes was new:

While we were at the level of learning the letters, we tried to write a composition. We are working at a vocational school. The other teachers were already using technology in their classes, at least they were familiar. But we are in a different position. We do not use any technology in our classes. We do not have any technological infrastructure for that. Even the idea of using technology is utopian. (Nevin)

Another teacher who had an inclination to utilize technological tools for instructional purposes showed that he could easily adapt to the training:

I think it is important to be close to computer to be successful at a training like this. Personally, I have always used computer. When I worked at a private institution, I was in charge of a tool similar to smart boards. I use computer for everything. For preparing exam questions, creating a data bank as a compilation of questions. I like these kinds of things. If you do not use or know such things, this training would be hard. (Ahmet)

Nearly all of the teachers indicated that they were more familiar with the face-to-face medium and preferred it over the online medium since they did not have prior experience with online learning environments. They also believed that face-to-face training would be more conducive to their learning needs as one of the teachers described as follows:

I am more familiar with face-to-face method. It is more intimate. Even eye contact is important. It feels like you can ask more questions when the trainer is next to you. In the online platform, you type, click enter, and wait. I feel stressed in case you would not see what I write. When you are together, I can interfere quickly and ask whatever I want. (Sevil)

A teacher who had prior experience of taking an online course said that she did not have much difficulty in the training and felt herself competent to receive online training in the future, contrary to another teacher who felt overwhelmed as it was her first online experience as shown below:

I participated in an online course before. For this reason, this training was not challenging for me. I have not used WizIQ or Edmodo before. But they were quite similar to what we did in the online training. I can participate in an online training in the future, too. It is not hard for me. (Cemre)

When you are having your first online experience, you feel overwhelmed. If I were familiar with this method, I would not feel that much unprepared. In the second time, I am sure I will feel myself more competent. (Nevin)

6.3. Design elements of the training

All of the teachers pointed out that timing was one of the biggest problems concerning the design of the training. They mentioned that during the time of the training, they had heavy workloads at school and this prevented them from concentrating on the training fully as one of the teachers explained below:

I wish the training would be at a time when I was totally free. This way, I could give my concentration on the training fully. During the training period, we were so busy at school. It was the end of school and we were dealing with lots of things. If my only duty were to participate in the training, I would not be in a hurry and would study more. (Fatma)

Three of the teachers stated they benefited from the e-mails which were sent to each teacher as a checklist for weekly tasks at the beginning and end of every week. According to one of the teachers, this increased her motivation and helped her stay on task as she explained below:

Before the sessions, you sent us an e-mail about the weekly content and tasks. This motivated me a lot. It also reminded me of the things I forgot. I knew what to do for that week. (Fatma)

Some of the teachers appreciated the flexibility provided by the trainers in the choice of some tasks and the deadlines, which is seen in the following quote:

You gave the deadline of the blog reports by consulting us. It was nice to have flexibility. You also made some tasks optional. It was good because it was not possible for me to do these tasks in my classroom. You also gave options for week four tasks. I chose what I liked. (Cemre)

When asked about the reasons for not using Edmodo for asking questions to peers, most of the teachers stated that asking the other teacher participants was not as comfortable as asking the trainers individually as two teachers explain below:

I did not share any of the problems I encountered in Edmodo. I did not want other teachers to think that I could not do and I was bad. Rather, I preferred contacting you directly. I phoned you. It is more relaxing for me to ask the trainer. (Nevin)

I had my husband with me during the training. If I did not have him, maybe I would share my problems in Edmodo. But it is hard to reveal that I am not able to do in front of others. So I couldn't write about my problems there. (Göknur)

Five of the teachers accentuated that an online CALL training like this should be "situated" in teachers' classroom contexts, in order to get them to apply the technological tools of training in their classes and reflect on their practice as a way to boost their capability to integrate these tools into their teaching:

Most of us could not apply these new things in our classes. There was not enough time for that. This is bad. If we applied, we would have more things to talk about and really learn about these tools. (Melek)

If the training had more link to our teaching contexts including our textbooks and students, it would be more helpful. Knowing the tool is one thing. The realities of the classroom is another. We learnt many things but I am not sure about how I can incorporate them into my everyday teaching. (Nevin)

Some of the teachers highlighted that an immediate application of the tools in a classroom context would allow them to have first-hand experience of the tools, see real life problems and discuss possible solutions for these problems with the trainers and other participant teachers as one of the teachers noted below:

A training like this should involve applications in our classes. If there is no immediate application in a classroom, you do not develop the competence to use it in your classes on your own. It would be better if we applied these in our classes in your guidance and talked about how it went. This way, we would share the problems we encountered. You learn such things as you apply. (Sevil)

6.4. Contributions of the training

All of the participating teachers indicated that thanks to the training, they became familiar with cutting-edge CALL tools and developed ideas about possible ways to use them in their classes as explained by one of the teachers below:

While learning new tools in the training, a lot of ideas popped up in my mind. For example, I can create a class blog. My students can watch a film at home and write a critique of the film in the class blog. Other students can comment on these critiques. They can publish their poems, videos or something they write. We can also create a school website to give announcements, to exhibit students' work, etc. I know I can do these from now on. (Cemre)

Most of the teachers repeatedly said that the online CALL training increased their awareness of the importance of using new technologies for teaching English and motivated them to perpetuate their professional development in this area.

Thanks to this training, I have realized that I should spend more time on my professional development and this was my responsibility. The training gave me ideas on how I can do this. I have even searched for other online courses and found a few. I will attend some of them from now on. (Fatma)

One of the teachers mentioned that she started to understand her students better since some of her beliefs concerning students' use of technology during class time changed thanks to the training as she commented below:

My students always took pictures of the board with their mobile phones and did not want to write them in their notebooks and I got so angry at these times. But now I understand them. Last year, I used to collect their phones but now I allow them to use them to take pictures. (Göknur)

Despite their familiarity with the face-to-face medium, many teachers posited that this training enabled them to get rid of their prejudice against online learning. They said that

they developed self-confidence about attending future online training as expressed below:

At first, I never thought I would be successful at an online course. But as time passed, I really got familiar with this mode and I saw that I was able to do. This made me so happy. I believe I can attend other online courses. (Fatma)

6.5. Suggestions for improvement

Teachers who encountered many difficulties during the training indicated that these difficulties were mainly due to their computer proficiency, which was not adequate for being successful at an online CALL training. To this end, they suggested that teachers who are devoid of basic computer skills should first take a face-to-face or blended CALL training as they commented below:

This training should not be fully online. It should have some face-to-face component. We will gather in a classroom with our laptops and learn about these tools. The steps of creating a blog, for instance, will be shown. At home, we will have an online session and have an application of what we learnt in the classroom. If I were more proficient at using computer, it could be online without any face-to-face lesson. But my computer skills are not enough for a fully online course. (Nevin)

I would prefer that such training is face-to-face rather than online. If I were better at computer, there would not be any problem with the training being online or face-to-face. (Sevil)

A few of the teachers emphasized that there is a need for taking a course on basic computer skills before participating in a CALL training regardless of whether this is face-to-face or online as one teacher stated:

Maybe, first of all, I should take a course on basic computer skills. I took such a course before but I guess it is not enough. I am not equipped with the skills to attend an online training. But even if the training were face-to-face, I would still need to learn the basics of computer first. (Sevil)

Many teachers stressed that the participating teachers came from different levels of schools with different student profiles, which affected the level of interaction and sharing among these teachers. Since they had different teaching contexts, their application of the training tools also varied drastically. As a remedy for this problem, they suggested that CALL training should involve teachers from similar types of school as they explain below:

In the training, there were teachers from different types of schools. If teachers were from one type of school, the conditions of these schools would be similar and teachers would have more to talk about. But in our situation, a lot of things were different. Maybe, a training like this can be given based on the type of school. Schools with similar student profile and technological infrastructure can be grouped and given a training together. (Melek)

Nearly all of the teachers complained that they were not well-informed about the communication tools, mainly Edmodo and WizIQ at the outset of the training although they were provided with some brief information about these tools in the wikipage. They stressed that for people who used them for the first time, more visuals and explanations were necessary. One of the teachers suggested having a whole session for learning about these tools in detail. These are reflected in the following quote:

I read about WizIQ and Edmodo in Wiki. You gave descriptions of these, I know. But they were not enough for me. I could not understand what we will be doing in WizIQ. I wanted to see some videos or pictures. If I had these in the first week, I would not be this much shocked. (Melek)

One of the teachers noted that the computer programs required for the course should be announced to teachers before the training started. According to this teacher, such a precaution would prevent the participant teachers from losing time during the training sessions as he expressed below:

When we started the first session on WizIQ, my computer did not have some programs. I needed to download these programs. This slowed me down and I missed a few things you mentioned during the session. I also did not know we needed a microphone at first. If I were notified of these before, I would not waste a lot of time trying to fix all these during the training time. (Ahmet)

7. Discussion and conclusion

The findings showed that the participating teachers had varying levels of computer competence, which was also highly emphasized in the CALL literature as affecting the success of CALL courses or training negatively. In the implementation of internet projects for in-service EFL teachers in Siberia, Olesova and Meloni (2006), for instance, pointed out that teachers' computer skills varied drastically and suggested that this should be taken into account in the planning and design of any CALL training. In an online pre-service CALL course, Bauer-Ramazani (2006) also referred to some teacher candidates with "varying levels of comfort with technology" (p.196) as one of the challenges in the online course.

Prior experience of using technology in class seemed to play an important role for the teachers' ease in handling their online CALL learning experience more easily. Research also showed that this experience is not only important in order for teachers to gain benefits from CALL training but also for transferring these gains to a classroom context. In a study exploring the use of CALL by L2 teachers taking a graduate CALL course, Egbert, Paulus and Nakamichi (2002) found that "teachers who use CALL activities are often those teachers who had experience with CALL prior to taking the course" (p.108).

A few of the teachers expressed their need to receive an initial training on basic computer skills before attending training that is specifically oriented towards CALL. This need is plausible and in line with Peters' (2006) findings. In a pre-service CALL course which melded the teaching of both technical and pedagogical skills, the varying levels of computer proficiency of language teachers and the inefficiency of teaching both technical and pedagogical skills in a single course demonstrated that CALL training focusing on pedagogy should take place only after technical knowledge and a skill-base is established. This assumption holds true especially for an online CALL course, which requires a wide variety of technical skills on the part of the teachers.

Another significant finding of the study was that the teachers expected CALL training courses such as the one described here, which they receive for the first time to have at least some face-to-face contact rather than being wholly online. They also emphasized that these training courses should take place in classrooms, incorporated into real life classroom practices. The situated CALL course or training was either directly or indirectly mentioned as a conceptual framework in a wide range of studies (e.g. Cutrim Schmid & Hegelheimer, 2014; Egbert, 2006; Rickard, Blin & Appel, 2006). Hubbard and Levy (2006) also emphasized the "need to connect CALL education to authentic teaching settings" (ix). The in-service teachers in Meskill, Anthony, Hilliker-VanStrander, Tseng and You's (2006) study who took part in expert-novice mentoring in their teaching contexts pointed at the importance of "more time to learn, to experiment, to try things out, and to integrate" (294) through "exposure to real teaching situations" (p.282) for benefitting from CALL training. Taken together, these studies substantiate the merits of situated CALL training for in-service language teachers, who are mostly in need of on-site CALL exposure and practice in their local contexts.

Based on the findings, it can be suggested that before the teachers receive any CALL training, be it face-to-face or online, they should be assessed on their computer proficiency. The teachers lacking basic computer skills should first attend a training course on how to use the computer in order to be technically equipped for the upcoming pedagogic CALL training. In order to better help language teachers to transfer the know-how gained in CALL training to their classroom context, the training should have a situated focus, and be relevant to the teachers' teaching contexts, the curriculum, the textbooks they use, the resources they have available, and so on.

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