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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

# Opportunities and Challenges of U.S.-Based Professional Development for English Language Teachers in Azerbaijan

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**Ethical Statement**
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**ABSTRACT**

The purpose of this study is to highlight the experiences of teachers during the third iteration of a U.S.-based professional development (PD) program (Kennedy, 2016) for English language teachers (ELTs) in Azerbaijan and explore necessary factors when designing PD for another country or cultural/linguistic context. Designed with the conceptual framework of situated learning (Lave & Wenger, 1991), the PD program centered learning in the context of real lived experiences and focused on developing leaders in local communities of practice. We utilize the intrinsic case study methodology (Stake, 1995; Yin, 2003) to explore the experiences of five focal Azerbaijani ELTs during the PD program. We found that participants of the PD course are dedicated practitioners who seek opportunities to grow in their profession; the PD course strengthened their communities of practice, growing confidence among teachers in speaking English; and it promoted limited pedagogical learning and applications in the classroom. However, teachers faced environmental and policy challenges that largely hindered changes to their teaching practices. This study points to implications for future PD programs designed for cross-cultural contexts by building on Desimone's (2009) framework for effective PD by adding core features and essential contextual factors that must be considered.

**Keywords:** English language teachers, professional learning and development, Azerbaijan, communicative language teaching

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# INTRODUCTION

In recent years English language teaching has become "a multi-billion-dollar enterprise" (Murray & Christison, 2019, p. ix) as English is increasingly taught as a second language, used as the language of instruction, and adapted as a lingua franca (Kirkpatrick, 2020). Yet, there are often concerns about the quality of teaching, especially in the most vulnerable nations (UNESCO, 2021). In addition, the March 2024 UNESCO's "Global Report on Teachers" brought renewed attention to the global shortage of qualified teachers needed to meet its "Sustainable Development Goal" of inclusive and equitable quality education for all by 2030. The report points to international collaboration and professional development (PD) as potential levers to address the demand for teachers and teacher quality. Kennedy (2024) reflects on this call-to-action, warning: "This is not simply a one-problem fix requiring more new teachers, but an invitation to consider how the whole ecosystem of teacher education and professional learning might work more coherently within and across borders" (p. 1). Azerbaijan, a country at the crossroads of Western Asia and Eastern Europe, in the South Caucasus region, shares the need for highly trained teachers to meet the increasing demand for English (Huseynova, 2019). This paper explores one program's efforts to connect across borders by highlighting the experiences of Azerbaijani English language teachers (ELTs) who participated in a U.S.-developed PD and shares how future cross-cultural PD needs to explicitly address critical contextual factors as well as fundamental components to ensure success in teaching and learning.

Professional development (PD) is "an ongoing learning process in which teachers engage voluntarily to learn how to best adjust their teaching to the learning needs of their students" (Diaz-Maggioli, 2003, p. 1). It is considered essential for continued growth and development of educators (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017; Desimone, 2009; Kennedy, 2016; Lee, 2011; Wei et al., 2009). Yet, PD for English language teachers (ELTs) is often varied (Desimone, 2009) and not always effective in changing teachers' behaviors (Lee, 2011).

Therefore, the purpose of this study is to identify factors to consider when designing PD for another country or cultural/linguistic context by exploring the experiences of teachers during the third iteration of a U.S.-based PD program for ELTs in Azerbaijan in 2023, building upon Desimone's (2009) framework for effective PD, and addressing UNESCO's 2024 call to ensure equitable education for all by having well-trained teachers worldwide. Sponsored by the U.S. Department of State, 99 English language K-11 public school teachers in Azerbaijan participated in the PD program to learn and practice research-backed principles of second language teaching. Our research questions were:

1) What was the experience of Azerbaijani ELTs participating in the PD program?

2) How did the teachers describe the PD's benefits and impact on practice?

We will share implications for future PD based upon teachers' experiences.

## Context of the Study

Azerbaijan has been a sovereign state since the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, yet a reliance on an authoritarian style of teaching continues (Hatcher, 2008; Huseynova, 2019). Hatcher (2008) summarizes the preferences of Azerbaijani learners:

> Azerbaijani students… expect teachers to direct learning rather than for students to direct learning, to view an excellent teacher rather than two-way communication as the cause of effective learning, and to view learning as dependent upon the wisdom of the teacher rather than dependent upon universal facts obtainable from objective sources other than the teacher. (p. 6)

Huseynova (2019) also noted that pre-service teacher preparation for Azerbaijani teachers "doesn't focus on either

teachers' or students' critical thinking, communication, or problem-solving skills" (p. 32) and therefore, "[teachers] struggled to involve students in learning actively" (p. 29).

Language study is required for all students in public schools in Azerbaijan, with most learners choosing English as their second language. An analysis in 2021 of the national English language curricula by an English Language Specialist to Azerbaijan, Nathan Carr, revealed that a lack of communicative practice left learners unable to use English as a means of communication (personal communication, 3 September 2022). In response to this gap, in 2021, the U.S. Embassy in Baku prioritized English teacher training among their budget allocations and the current institution developed an online PD program for ELTs. While foreign-provided PD for English teachers had been offered previously in Azerbaijan, teachers described it as largely "instructor-centered" and "not providing necessary time in discussion with other teachers." In contrast, the 2023 ELT PD program, informed by two years of participant feedback, was designed to introduce communicative language teaching practices and student-centered approaches and to give teachers opportunities to discuss and adapt strategies for their classrooms. For 14 weeks, ELTs met twice weekly through an online video platform, once for a lecture presentation and once for discussion practicum. The lecture topics, chosen by the primary PD instructor, focused on theories of second language acquisition and teaching (see Appendix A for the teaching topics). At the conclusion of the online PD program, 60 participants were invited to present classroom applications at the culminating conference held in person in Azerbaijan with 405 local education professionals in attendance.

## Theoretical Frameworks

### *Situated Learning Theory*

The PD program for ELTs in Azerbaijan was designed with situated learning as the guiding theoretical framework. Situated learning theory (SLT), defined by Brown et al. (1995) and expanded by Lave and Wenger (1991), marked a divergence from earlier views that focused on individual learning of abstract ideas and teacher dominated top-down instruction. SLT centers learning in the context of real lived experiences, emphasizes relationships with others (not just with the instructor) and focuses on developing leaders in their communities, called communities of practice (CoPs) (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Within these spaces, learners develop greater levels of expertise and roles in leadership. Learning is seen as "a dynamic process of guidance, support, and co-construction or reconceptualization of practice" (O'Brien & Battista, 2020, p. 484). For this reason, the professional development program for ELTs in Azerbaijan was centered on the practical application of skills and strategies by teachers in their local classrooms. The PD program also focused on relationship-building among teachers as CoPs were strengthened and leaders emerged.

Prior to delivering the third year of the program, program administrators in the US considered the ways they could utilize the growing network of past program participants to help build such CoPs. Peer mentorship could be mutually beneficial for new participants in feeling competent and supported as well as for mentor teachers to gain confidence in their own pedagogical methods (Kissau & King, 2015). Therefore, a key component of the 2023 program included the role of peer mentors who attended discussion groups, answered questions via WhatsApp, a messaging platform, and provided support with lesson plans and activities.

### *Communicative Language Teaching*

Communicative language teaching (CLT), the focus of the PD, originated in the 1970s as a significant shift away from traditional grammar and text-based approaches to teaching languages (Richards, 2006) as "addressing the needs of mobile or migrant language learners wishing to convey and interpret meanings in actual social contexts became

paramount" (Duff, 2014, p. 18). These language learners wanted to use their growing language not for literary analysis or translation but instead to complete everyday tasks in a new cultural and linguistic context (Duff, 2014) resulting in a new emphasis on a pragmatic and learner-centered instructional approach. Qasserras (2023) explains, "through the CLT approach, learners are encouraged to develop their communicative competence by using the language in meaningful and real-life situations" (p. 17). Despite the widespread adoption of this approach, an influential study by Spada (1987) (as cited in Duff, 2014) demonstrated that teachers often claim that they are proponents of CLT, but observations of their actual instruction reveal an adherence to traditional language teaching. Duff (2014) shared some of the factors related to teachers' ability to incorporate CLT practices including "the teachers' confidence and competence in teaching and using English, managing class time, and covering the curriculum" (p. 25).

## Professional Development for Teachers

Professional development (PD) is an integral tool to support teachers who must adapt to educational reform and prepare learners to succeed in the 21st century (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017; Kennedy, 2016; Lee, 2011). PD for U.S. teachers makes up a large part of school funding from national, state, and local governments (Desimone, 2009; Kennedy, 2016) and is credited as an important way to improve the quality of schools (Desimone, 2009). It has been argued that PD is necessary to improve teacher quality (Lee, 2011; Wei et al., 2009); build teachers' pedagogical content knowledge (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017; Goldschmidt & Phelps, 2010; McNeill & Knight, 2013); meet the changing needs of learners in our global society (Lee, 2011; Zeggelaar et al., 2020); develop collaborative relationships among educators (Gregson & Sturko, 2007); and positively impact student performance (Wei et al., 2009). However, PD does not play as large of a role in Azerbaijan, whose schools suffer from poor government funding in general, negatively affecting facilities, teachers' salaries, and opportunities for on-the-job training (Guliyev, 2016).

Since the 1990s, PD has moved away from its traditional style described as "'flavor of the month' or 'oneshot workshop'" (Wei et al., 2009, p. 6). Today, PD is diverse in its forms and includes workshops, courses, co-teaching, observations, book clubs, teacher study groups and other activities that stimulate teacher learning and growth (Desimone, 2009; Lee, 2011). Desimone (2009) explains what counts as PD: "These experiences can range from formal, structured, topic-specific seminars given on in-service days, to everyday, informal 'hallway' discussions with other teachers about instruction techniques, embedded in teachers' everyday work lives" (p. 182).

There has been disagreement about the necessary characteristics of effective PD for teachers (Popova et al., 2022). Desimone (2009) organized findings into five essential features to create a core conceptual framework of effective PD. They include 1) focus on content; 2) active learning by teachers; 3) coherence between PD and teachers' knowledge and beliefs as well as state policies; 4) duration of time of at least a semester or 20 hours of contact time; and 5) collective participation of a core group of teachers at the same school, grade, or department. She points out that these features are embedded in a larger context of teacher and student characteristics, the curriculum, school leadership, and policy environment. Desimone's (2009) work suggested that effective PD can change teachers' skills and beliefs, drive instructional changes and ultimately lead to higher student achievement. Popoval et al. (2022) affirmed that greater student achievement was linked to PD with a specific subject focus and those which require teachers to actively try strategies in their classrooms. They found that better results were afforded in PD programs that were tied to teacher incentives including promotions and pay raises, and the most successful PD programs were those that included face-to-face interactions.

Yet, the connection between PD and changes in classroom instruction is not a linear relationship (Guskey, 1986). Adapting new strategies for classroom practices usually means "the abandonment of a prior approach" (Kennedy,

2016, p. 948) that had developed according to the pressures and challenges encountered in the local context. Therefore, research-backed strategies presented during PD do not always directly equate to changes in teacher practice. PD programs "typically meet with teachers *outside* of their classroom to talk about teaching, yet they expect their words to alter teachers' behaviors *inside* the classroom" (Kennedy, 2016, p. 948, italics added). For this reason, PD efforts have increasingly turned towards teacher research, or action research, in which teachers engage in research on their own practice, critically examining their own classroom practices, implementing specific changes and collecting and analyzing subsequent student data about outcomes (Manfra, 2021). This format unifies the PD and the teaching in the same space, inside the classroom and with the current learners.

## METHODOLOGY

In this study we utilize the intrinsic case study methodology (Stake, 1995; Yin, 2003) to explore the experiences of five focal Azerbaijani ELTs who participated in the PD program. Case study methodology considers a variety of data sources to explore the individual stories of participants and better understand their experiences (Baxter & Jack, 2008). With case study methodology, "the issue is not explored through one lens, but rather a variety of lenses which allows for multiple facets of the phenomenon to be revealed and understood" (Baxter & Jack, 2008, p. 544). Therefore, we draw from multiple sources of data, each "one piece of the puzzle" (Baxter & Jack, 2008, p. 544), including semi-structured interviews with teacher participants and instructors and document collection of coursework (Baxter & Jack, 2008). The case is a bounded entity limited by the time of the program, spring 2023, and the activities of the PD course (Stake, 1995). Therefore, it is a unique case that is not necessarily representative of the experience of all the participants but is itself of interest (Baxter & Jack, 2008; Stake, 1995) for the information it shares and with the goal of trying to "preserve the multiple realities, the different and even contradictory views of what is happening" (Stake 1995, p. 12). Our goal is to highlight the teacher participants' voices in this study to describe their experiences and takeaways from the PD program as well as suggest improvements and implications for future cross-cultural programs.

### Data Collection

This paper draws upon data collected during the 2023 iteration of the ELT PD program. Following the PD program's conclusions, semi-structured individual interviews lasting 45-60 minutes were conducted with five focal Azerbaijani teacher participants and the three PD instructors. A partial transcript was provided of each recorded interview, generated by the video conferencing platform. Transcripts were filled in and corrected by watching the video-recorded interviews and notes were added by the research team (see Appendix B for positionality statements of the researchers). The Azerbaijani teacher interviews focused on the teachers' background, past experiences with PD, experiences during the current PD program, impact of the PD on practice and challenges that they faced implementing new strategies. The three PD instructors' interviews focused on their teaching background, their role in the PD and their impressions about teachers' capacity to change their practice. Other sources of data include WhatsApp messages, document collection including program applications, Flipgrid introduction videos and classwork assignments including lesson plans and videos from their classrooms (see Appendix C for descriptions of the PD assignments). Finally, a pre- and post-assessment on English language and pedagogical knowledge for 89 PD participants are also considered in this study.

### Participants and Data Sources

The five focal Azerbaijani ELT participants (see Table 1) were chosen based upon their willingness to be a part of the study and due to their full participation during the course, measured by submitting all the assignments. These ELTs teach English in multiple grades from first to 11$^{th}$ grades and have an average of 8.2 years of teaching experience. Three of the participants are from urban settings and two are from rural settings. Secondary participants included the three

U.S.-based university professors, who were hired to develop and deliver the training sessions. Janet (all names are pseudonyms) and Author 1 prepare ELTs at a research-oriented public university and Penny teaches at a neighboring community college where she directs a program for English learning adults in addition to preparing ELTs. Data was also drawn from pre and post assessments on English language and pedagogical knowledge.

**Table 1.** Participants and Data Sources.

| Pseudonym | Role | Data sources |
|---|---|---|
| Fatima | Azerbaijani English language teacher. Teaches grades 1, 9, 10, and 11 in a rural district in southern Azerbaijan. She has nine years of experience as a teacher. | 1:1 Interview, application to PD program, Flipgrid video, coursework activities and videos, WhatsApp texts |
| Clara | Azerbaijani English language teacher. Teaches grades 5 and 7 in Baku (capital). She has three years of experience as a teacher. | 1:1 Interview, application to PD program, Flipgrid video, coursework activities and videos, WhatsApp texts, feedback survey after PD program |
| Nazrin | Azerbaijani English language teacher who teaches grades 2, 3, 9, 10, and 11 north of Baku. She has five years of experience as a teacher. | 1:1 Interview, application to PD program, Flipgrid video, coursework activities and videos, WhatsApp texts, feedback survey after PD program |
| Ayan | Azerbaijani English language teacher who teaches grades 5-11 north of Baku. She has ten years of experience as a teacher. | 1:1 Interview, application to PD program, Flipgrid video, coursework activities and videos, WhatsApp texts, feedback survey after PD program |
| Madina | Azerbaijani English language teacher who teaches grades 1-11 in a small town at the northern border of Azerbaijan. She has 14 years of experience as a teacher. | 1:1 Interview, application to PD program, Flipgrid video, coursework activities and videos, WhatsApp texts, feedback survey after PD program |
| Janet | Main instructor and designer of the PD curriculum. Third time she has led the program. | 1:1 Interview |
| Author 1 | PD discussion group instructor. First time she has participated as an instructor in the program. | 1:1 Interview |
| Penny | PD discussion group instructor. Third time she has participated as an instructor in the program. | 1:1 Interview |
| Program Data | Pre and post assessment data for English language assessment and pedagogical assessment. Tests were created by the main instructor, Janet. | Data drawn from 2023 |

## Data Analysis

Data analysis began while correcting and filling in the interview transcripts that were partially generated by the video conferencing platform. Since auto-transcription of non-native English speakers is rarely accurate, making corrections to the interview transcripts was a necessary step to interpret meaning. A close listen to each interview allowed us to simultaneously correct the transcript and engage in line-by-line coding (Charmaz & Thornberg, 2021) to identify emerging themes from the data. Memo writing and subsequent focused coding (Charmaz & Thornberg, 2021) helped solidify an understanding of the perspectives and experiences of our participants expressed in their interviews. The research team met to discuss thoughts and questions, collapsing and subsuming the codes when they overlapped. The next step was to collate codes from the interview transcripts in a table with participant quotes that aligned with each code. We began to see common codes emerge across interviews including wide variety of student ages/ grades; influences from parents to become a teacher; love of teaching English; lack of technology at school; and pressure of standardized tests.

After each subsequent data analysis with the interviews, we met to discuss topics and themes that emerged and questions that had surfaced. This iterative process allowed deeper understanding as we clarified meaning with key participants via WhatsApp. The central themes that emerged from the Azerbaijani teacher interviews included benefits of the PD program, love of English language teaching, role of government-issued assessments on language instruction and difficult teaching conditions.

Similarly, the PD instructor interviews were checked for accuracy against the video recording and line by line coding was used to identify initial codes, including focus on strategies, efforts to connect teachers, teacher engagement and encountering traditional authoritarian modes of teaching.

To triangulate our data (Baxter & Jack, 2008; Merriam, 2009; Stake, 1995), the next round of data analysis included coding the PD applications including Flipgrid introductory videos, and course activities of each of the focal teacher participants. The supplemental materials were used to support the themes emerging from the interviews and provided examples of how the strategies presented during the PD were or were not present in Azerbaijani classrooms.

## Findings

In this section, we share insights that emerged about the case study focusing on the five focal Azerbaijani ELTs and how they experienced the PD program. Specifically, it was found that 1) the English language teachers are dedicated practitioners of English who actively seek opportunities to grow in their profession; 2) the PD course strengthened their communities of practice, helping to grow confidence in English among teachers; and 3) the course provided some pedagogical learning and opportunities for applications in the classroom despite continued evidence of teachers' reliance on top-down, teacher-directed instruction in practice. Ultimately, success was limited because 4) teachers faced challenges, both from the teaching environment and policies outside of their control that largely hindered changes to their teaching practices. In this section, we will center the voices of the teacher participants to highlight their personal reflections of the PD program and illuminate changes for future PD.

### Dedicated Practitioners: "I'm a lifelong learner. I work on myself."

All five focal teacher participants expressed their love of learning and speaking English and their dedication to being ELTs. For example, Madina reported how she saw English as a useful language for international travel and independence: "English is a global language. If you know English language, you don't need a translator. You can go around the world, travel to see new things, new places." Fatima described how much she enjoys teaching English not only for the international skills that it provides her learners, but also for the relationships she is able to form with her students: "I love my field, because, you know, it not only allows me to build strong bonds with my students, but also help my students broaden their learning and career opportunities."

In addition, the teachers prided themselves on being professional ELTs, a position that they described as worthy of respect, especially for women. For example, Madina shared that her motivation to become a teacher was due in part to her mother who believed teaching to be a good profession for women: "It was the desire of my mom, because in our country some parents think that to be a teacher is a good profession or job for girls."

The teachers described themselves as life-long learners who sought out opportunities to improve their English language skills and their pedagogical knowledge. For example, Ayan described her interest in PD opportunities: "I teach at a small school, but we are doing our best to improve our teaching skills and trying to participate in different projects… I'm a lifelong learner. I work on myself. I join different online courses." Even after the conclusion of the PD program, teachers demonstrated their long-term commitment to improving their practice by their continued communication via WhatsApp chat groups in which they shared webinars and other resources for teaching English.

### Communities of Practice and Confidence: "It was a mind-blowing thing."

Aligned with situated learning (Brown et al., 1995; Lave & Wenger, 1991) as the guiding theoretical framework, the PD program played an integral role in developing and strengthening the communities of practice (CoPs) (Lave & Wenger, 1991) among Azerbaijani ELTs. For example, Ayan reflected on meeting other teachers through the program and the development of a growing professional network of teachers in Azerbaijan:

> Following my participation in the professional development program, not only did I get to know a lot of English teachers all around Azerbaijan, but I also gained friends. Recently, with their help, I joined another teacher volunteer group. It helps for networking and being aware of different activities or useful training.

Collaborative tasks embedded in the PD also contributed to the development of CoPs. Teachers met weekly in small discussion groups, commented on each other's forum posts and worked in pairs on lesson plans and conference presentations. Support among teachers is evident in the written discussion forum comments in which teachers shared new strategies and others praised and encouraged them. For example, for one PD assignment, Fatima shared a video of her seventh-grade students. Discussion group colleagues responded to her post, praising her work and encouraging her. One colleague wrote on the forum: "This activity is perfect. Your way of explaining is great. I hope everyone will enjoy while reading your reflection and watching your video."

Due to the growing supportive relationships among participants, teachers cited the growing confidence that they observed in others, especially in speaking English. For example, Fatima observed how one teacher transformed in her speaking during the semester:

> So, I have to say that I remember that in January, when I was sent to the breakout rooms there was a teacher whose speaking skills was not that good. Maybe she was reluctant to speak; maybe her speaking skills is really fine, but she didn't want to share her opinions because some teachers here are reluctant to speak…. I had the same breakout room with the same teacher in April, and… she spoke really good. She shared her ideas… it was a mind-blowing thing, you know, teacher who came here with maybe limited English skills or like low motivated. But, at the end of the course she was courageous. She was brave enough to share her ideas and contribute to the group.

Assessment data from 89 PD participants who completed both a pre-program and post-program assessment on English language competence showed that the average score rose only one point from the pre-assessment to the post-assessment. This data suggests that participants' increase in English speaking is more likely attributed to greater confidence, a key factor of communicative fluency, rather than an increase in English proficiency.

Finally, participants shared that they felt more confident in their roles as ELTs following the PD program. For many teachers, the culminating conference in Baku was their first opportunity to present to other professionals. Ayan described the newfound confidence that she gained: "It left a lasting effect. Interacting with teachers, managing the session, feeling responsible for it, putting in all of my efforts, and eventually receiving favorable feedback from the audience filled my heart with incredible confidence."

### Pedagogical Learning and Applications: "It somehow brought color to my teaching skills."

Azerbaijani ELTs noted the benefits of being introduced to new pedagogical strategies and especially for opportunities for practical application in their own classrooms during the PD program. For example, Ayan described how she was able to replicate an activity that was modeled during the PD with her learners and how it made her feel empowered:

> Each time when I learned [something] new, I tried to apply it into … my class. For example, [Janet] teacher showed one picture and said "please describe this picture. What do you think about this picture? Use your imagination." I brought this same picture into my classroom and showed my students, and I got different stories from them, and that was exciting for me! And I think that it somehow brought color to my teaching skills.

Clara, another ELT, shared that she learned novel approaches to practice listening in the classroom including pre-listening activities such as scanning the questions in advance and previewing key vocabulary to help students anticipate

what they will hear. She explained her growth in pedagogical practices:

> I was not good at making lesson planning, but in this program, I learned especially listening lessons. Before, [during] listening, I've never asked my students to read the sentences like for example: "fill in the gap, listen, and fill the gaps." I've never asked students to read the sentences, but in this program, I learned that first, we should make our students read the sentences, give the key words, and then do the listening.

Teachers also claimed that they learned to move away from a focus only on structure to an emphasis on communicative competence. Madina reflected on her new emphasis on communication, rather than "perfection" in English utterances:

> For example, before I paid attention to their grammar that they speak accurately. But now I try, "don't pay attention to grammar mistakes. Try to speak. Try to recall your vocabulary. Try to use it. It's okay. Then you can correct your mistakes."

Clara explained how students speak more in English with each other in her class now and contrasted this with her own learning experience as a student: "I remember school years, because my teacher, my English teacher, never told us to speak, never encouraged us. That's why I still have difficulty to speak fluently in English."

### *Continued Challenges and Barriers to Implementation of Practices: "It's new for us and also for our students"*

**Reliance on top-down language instruction.** While there is evidence of some growth in teacher learning, especially in what ELTs reported about their practice, the findings pointed to continued reliance on traditional top-down language instruction in practice. Often, as mentioned by Duff (2014), there was a discrepancy between what teachers said that they did in the classroom and the practices captured in video recordings. For example, in her interview Fatima emphasizes how she has adopted communicative language teaching strategies in her classroom. She shares an example about transforming a reading activity about kindness from the required textbook. "This lesson was boring because it includes large chunks to read and people that the students don't know as examples." Incorporating communicative language strategies learned during the PD into the lesson, Fatima described the way that she teaches it now:

> Okay, let's not to *read* about this topic; let's *talk* about the kindest person you ever know, because there are some people in the text they don't know…. tell me about the kindest person you ever know. And then they started talking about maybe their cousins, their friends. Okay, describe them. Who they are?

Fatima claimed to make the lesson communicative by asking students to describe kind people that they know, allowing them to tap into their personal experiences.

However, video submissions by Fatima of classroom instruction revealed continued reliance on memorized scripts such as in a classroom video in which her students chanted the song, "Who Stole the Cookies from the Cookie Jar?" While students interacted with one another by chanting together, this is not demonstrative of CLT because students did not express likes, preferences, desires, or personal experiences. Instead, students recited a memorized chant, altering only the name of the student accused.

An additional example of teachers resorting to traditional modes of teaching is seen in a video submitted by Madina who asked her students to draw and color animals, tapping into their visual-spatial intelligence. However, when students were asked to describe the animals in front of the class, instead of freely describing them as the student wanted, the teacher asked questions about the color of specific body parts of their animals, effectively rendering it an assessment on body parts and colors.

**Environmental and policy challenges.** As indicated above, not all the ELTs were able to incorporate the teaching strategies, including CLT, in their video examples. Teachers pointed to environmental challenges including a lack of equipment and internet as well as limited use of English in the community that contributed to the difficulty of enacting

lasting pedagogical changes. Many teachers noted their frustration at limited access to equipment, including laptops, projectors, speakers and reliable internet in the classroom. It was common for teachers to bring their own technology from home each day including projectors and speakers and to use their personal cell phones to show videos in class. Ayan, who teaches in a suburb of Baku, explained, "sometimes we have lack of facilities, access in our school because it's small and that makes us very disappointed. We cannot use modern technologies at school… but we try, we do our best to bring with us computers." Nazrin also shared how she uses her own personal resources to bring technology into her classroom. Holding up her own hand-held Bluetooth speaker on the zoom interview, she explained,

> For example, in our school, where I am teaching English, we have no technologies for teaching listening. You see, I have own speaker and own personal computer. And every day I try take them with me to school and use them at the lessons.

Another source of frustration was the lack of English exposure in rural areas that would make learning English easier. Fatima, who teaches in a rural part of the country on the border with Iran, explained, "I teach in …[the] south part of Azerbaijan. So, it is a rural school, to be honest. [It] is a place where English is rarely spoken, and it's like deprived." Teachers often viewed their role as ELTs as fulfilling a need in their village to enable more exposure to English.

In addition to the environmental challenges noted, teachers also cited policy challenges that limited, in their minds, the implementation of new teaching methods learned in the PD program. Policy challenges stemmed primarily from a required English language curriculum and national standardized test that measured students' achievement during secondary school. The Azerbaijani ELTs described the pressure they felt to prepare students for the University Examination at the end of eleventh grade that was used to determine university admissions and funding (Ozisik, 2015). For this reason, ELTs cited the insistence that they focus on the mandated curriculum that emphasizes grammar and writing instruction to prepare students for the assessment. Nazrin, explained,

> In Azerbaijan most teachers, how to say, give attention to teach grammar, and students they only learn grammar rules, and they use them in the sentences, but teaching them listening, speaking, and the other skills is new for us and also for our students. So, I think the big problem in Azerbaijan in some schools… is to only… teach grammar. And we don't give attention to our students' using of language.

Penny, a PD discussion leader, acknowledged the challenge of convincing teachers to move beyond teaching to the test.

> A student-centered approach works for adult learners as well as for younger learners, and it does help improve all language skills. Convincing them of that sometimes is more difficult because we tend to teach the way that we've been taught. So that is sometimes hard to break through. It's hard to break that tradition.

Due to the tradition of a grammar-focused teaching and testing, like the ELTs, Azerbaijani parents and administration were accustomed to direct instruction and therefore protested when they observed new teaching practices. Penny noted this when she reflected,

> They, especially the teachers in Baku, a lot of times, they have push back from their administrators because they don't see, and even some students said that some parents called them and said, "What are you doing? I'm not sure that you're teaching them."

Penny encouraged teachers to make changes slowly over time instead of overhauling their classroom instruction to circumvent resistance.

## Discussion

In this section we will analyze the findings as we move towards suggestions for future cross-cultural PD programs. First, teacher participants expressed their dedication to the profession and interest in English. This is confirmed as an essential contextual factor in Desimone's (2009) framework for effective PD. ELTs' positive attitude towards teaching English and continued involvement in PD will likely contribute to future learning and the likelihood of eventually adapting new instructional practices.

Designed with situated learning theory (Lave & Wenger, 1991) in mind, the PD program emphasized relationship-building among the teacher participants in communities of practice (CoPs). These relationships and CoPs helped foster confidence among teachers as they began informal WhatsApp groups to support each other. Teachers involved in the PD program are now developing a professional network of teachers across the country.

Confidence building also positively impacted ELTs by increasing their confidence to speak English. Teachers in the program showed evidence of developing as users of English. For example, they were more apt to voice their opinions and experiences in English by the end of the program. This increase in fluency and confidence will improve their teaching abilities and confidence as they develop better control of the language (Duff, 2014).

Finally, the findings suggest that teachers moved along the continuum of practice from authoritarian, teacher-centered pedagogical practices towards CLT. This was evidenced by their ability to articulate the preferred teaching method and strategies. Teachers still appear to need additional support implementing new strategies into classroom practices. The PD itself served as a model of the preferred relationship between teacher and English language learners, centering students' experiences, requiring active engagement and asking teachers to personalize their learning by applying strategies in their local context. Penny confirmed this component as integral: "It's like the [teacher participants], learn what they're supposed to do in the student-centered environment, and then they learn that they really like it." Teachers, likewise, expressed appreciation for being able to discuss their individual experiences in the classroom during discussion group meetings. Nazrin confirms, "I prefer [the current] ELT program because we have a chance for speaking, for sharing our thoughts, our opinions." The instructional team hoped that this experience would make teachers more likely to replicate these methods with their own students, making their instruction more student-centered by providing time for students to use English to communicate personal ideas during the class activities. Darling-Hammond and colleagues (2017) confirmed that PD which centers on the teachers' experiences is a key factor for efficacy: "[PD is] designed to immerse the teachers in the types of learning activities and environments they will then be creating for their students" (p. 2).

Although the teachers were engaged during PD, it is possible that they need better examples of how to apply CLT strategies with their state mandated textbooks and required curriculum. More time, exposure, and collaboration with other Azerbaijani teachers in their region would better support the teachers as they attempt to experiment with their practice in a safe environment and reflect upon successes and failures. Darling-Hammond and colleagues (2017) argue that effective PD provides teachers with engaged learning over many months or even years to provide "teachers with adequate time to learn, practice, implement, and reflect upon new strategies that facilitate changes in their practice" (p. 4). Expanded roles for peer mentors as in classroom support could be considered in future implementations.

Environmental and policy challenges were cited as barriers to long-term changes, and while it is unlikely that a PD program can substantively address these issues, they point to the need to fully understand and respond to the conditions of the teaching context when developing PD programs, especially for teachers in another country. For

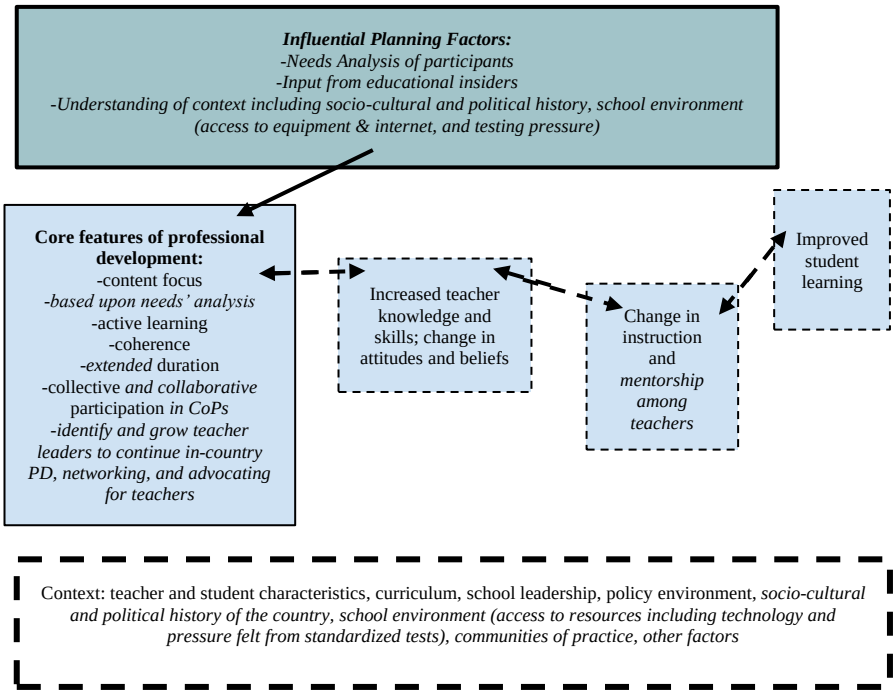
example, the US-based program designers did not have sufficient understanding of the local context for teachers in Azerbaijan. Throughout the program there was uncertainty about teachers' paths to becoming licensed professionals, previous PD experiences and the impact of a national curriculum and assessment on classroom teaching. This important context information needs to be understood prior to designing PD and should shape curricular decisions.

Furthermore, the PD program followed a top-down approach in which the topics were decided prior to beginning the program by the lead instructor, Janet, who explained, "I was in charge of choosing the topics. And so, that was an important role because it drove the curriculum." While Janet was thoughtful about the choices she made, drawing from previous PD she had facilitated, a survey of teachers' interests and needs is necessary. It is likely that Azerbaijani teachers' needs and interests will continue to evolve, reflecting new policies and pressures. An awareness that the PD facilitators have much to learn from and about the target context is needed to support a two-way transmission of ideas and information from receiving teachers to PD designers.

## Implications

Given the discussion above, there are important opportunities to improve future PD for teachers in other countries or socio-political and cultural/linguistic contexts. Accordingly, we have adapted Desimone's (2009) framework for professional development to reflect these additional factors when administering PD outside one's home culture (see Figure 1).

**Figure 1. Professional development framework for other countries or cultural/linguistic contexts. Adapted from Desimone's (2009) core conceptual framework of effective PD (italicized text has been added).**




First, we added contextual planning factors to the model for consideration prior to planning a PD program for teachers in another country. The planning stage should include a needs analysis of potential participants. In addition, educational insiders, peer mentors, administrators, and teacher educators in the target country should be consulted for

guidance on topics that would be useful for in-country teachers. Also, PD designers need to have a deep understanding of the context in which teachers work, including the socio-political history of the country and how this affects the education sector. Finally, steps should be taken to understand the school environment including access to equipment and technology as well as pressures faced by teachers, which in this case included standardized tests for college entrance. This contextual knowledge should be used to shape PD design, format and activities to maximize teacher engagement, and applications of PD in real life.

In the core features of effective PD designated by Desimone (2009), we believe that in addition to a content focus based upon the needs analysis of teachers, an extended duration of time is necessary when working across borders. The participants' feedback suggest that long-term success would be possible with greater follow-up time with the teacher participants, perhaps with peer mentors visiting them in their classrooms for a live observation or checking in with them in three or six months after conclusion of the program to provide further support for instructional changes.

We propose two additional core features for Desimone's (2009) framework: collaboration among teachers in CoPs and intentionally growing teacher leaders in-country. The current PD course included grades on assignments. The grades were implemented to ensure the rigor of the program and to hold teachers accountable for their attendance and submission of assignments. However, it may have unintentionally fueled competition in place of collaboration among teachers who were vying for an honors distinction, earned by highest averages. One teacher reflected on how she felt upset when colleagues copied her lesson plan "because we were graded back then, [and] all my sentences were copied without being paraphrased." Therefore, collaboration over competition among teachers in CoPs must be emphasized. If teachers agree that the goal is to improve education for all learners, instead of seeking individual gains or credentials, the PD can be more effective in enacting greater changes to practice. To this end, the PD must be designed to encourage and facilitate sharing among teachers of instructional ideas, plans and resources. Collaboration should be ensured by providing opportunities to create and nurture budding CoPs.

A second new core feature of professional development would be that the PD program should work to identify and equip teachers to become leaders on the ground to support teacher learning beyond the culmination of the current program. This would ensure that teacher leaders from within the country continue supporting teachers and organizing further PD opportunities that will address their evolving needs. The role of peer mentors needs to be expanded and reconceptualized. Peer mentors need to play a more instrumental role in all stages of the PD program including planning, implementing and follow-up.

Finally, the impact of the PD on changes in teachers' knowledge, skills, attitudes and beliefs as well as changes to instruction and ultimately, increases in student learning are indicated with a dotted line in the conceptual framework to represent the nonlinear relationship among these features. It cannot be assumed that even though the core features of the PD program are met, the impacts on practice and performance will come to fruition. There are still a considerable number of factors that will influence the impact on practice, including teachers' and learners' personal characteristics. For example, the local government has a role in facilitating these efforts by adequately funding schools including their school buildings and resources as well as salaries for teachers. Huseynova (2019) confirmed: "without governmental and systemic change, teachers lack the authority and competence to bring about the necessary changes" (p. 28).

## Conclusion

While these implications point to significant changes for future PD programs administered cross-culturally, one limitation of our study is the small number of focal participants. In the future, a greater number of teacher participants should be enrolled in the study or teachers across two different PD programs could be compared to offer greater insight into the effects of different models of PD. Another potential limitation is the primary reliance on interview data of teacher participants and instructors collected after the PD was concluded. Intermittent interviews during the PD delivery as well as reflective journals would be useful in gathering consistent data regarding teachers' experiences and learning during the program.

Future research may also consider engaging teachers in action research, in which they critically examine their own classroom practices, pose a problem that they observe, implement specific changes, and collect and analyze subsequent student data (Manfra, 2021). This would allow greater autonomy for teachers to direct research on classroom practices on areas that they identify as important for their context. The PD and the teaching would be, therefore, unified in the same space, inside the classroom and with the current learners.

Supporting the development of ELTs to engage learners with a comprehensive approach to language learning and with the emphasis on communicating personal ideas through language is an important undertaking. Working across borders to borrow strategies and lessons learned can strengthen the PD efforts for teachers. Through this case study we hope to bring attention to carefully consider additional core features of PD and contextual factors when developing PD programs to cross borders and work with teachers of different socio-political and cultural/ linguistic backgrounds. Ultimately, we hope that this work will help address UNESCO's (2024) call to address the global shortage of qualified teachers and thus ensure inclusive and equitable education for all by 2030.

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Appendix A. Pedagogical topics for weekly online classes

| Week | Topic | Week | Topic |
|---|---|---|---|
| **1** | English as a world language and the non-native English teacher | **9** | Happy Nowruz! No class |
| **2** | Language learning theories and their application in the EFL classroom | **10** | Teaching vocabulary |
| **3** | Lesson planning and classroom management | **11** | Teaching reading |
| **4** | Assessment techniques | **12** | Teaching writing |
| **5** | Teaching listening | **13** | Teaching grammar |
| **6** | Teaching speaking | **14** | Literature as content for language teaching |
| **7** | Teaching pronunciation | **15** | Task-based communicative language teaching |
| **8** | Conference workshop design | **16** | Final evaluation and conference information |

Appendix B. Positionality of researchers

Author 1 is a white bilingual researcher and university professor who speaks Spanish and English. She has taught international cohorts of teachers from Lebanon, Azerbaijan and Colombia. She also prepares U.S.-based teachers to teach English language both in the local U.S. community and abroad.

Author 2 is a white U.S. American international higher education administrator. She coordinates professional development programs for cohorts in various fields including teacher training, and centers cultural competence and identity development in her facilitation and practice. She has supported the PD program for Azerbaijani teachers since 2021 and is currently coordinating the 2024 PD program.

We, as researchers, approach this work with a gratitude and admiration for the Azerbaijani teachers who shared with us their experiences in the PD program. After traveling to Azerbaijan and hosting the conference for the teachers, we feel personally connected to the teachers and invested in their professional well-being. We see this project as an opportunity to highlight the work that ELTs are doing in this region, to expand opportunities in their country for further collaboration among and with teachers, and to design future cross-cultural PD with a more nuanced approach that responds to teachers' needs and interests. While we were the ones to organize and deliver the professional development, we learned a great deal from the teachers. In this light, we forefront the Azerbaijani teachers' voices in the case study to share findings and implications.

Appendix C. Descriptions of the PD assignments

| Title | Description |
|---|---|
| Activity #1: Activity that Uses Howard Gardner's Multiple Intelligences | Create and implement one activity that connects to one of the Multiple Intelligences. Refer back to this handout. Use some of the ideas that we discussed in class.<br><br>This class activity does not need to be long (5-10 minutes), should be connected to your existing lesson plan, and should exemplify any ideas that you have gained from this course. |
| Activity #2: Listening or Speaking Activity | Create a 5-10 minute listening or speaking activity for your classroom that is communicative, engaging, and student-centered. It should also tap into one of the multiple intelligences that we have studied. To provide evidence of your activity submit a discussion forum post on Moodle with:<br><br>1. A 2-3 minute video of your class participating in the activity OR a 2-3 minute video of you talking about what you are going to do (or what you did) in your classroom.<br><br>-AND-<br><br>2. A 300-word written reflection that tells us a) which of the multiple intelligences you tapped into; b) how this activity is "communicative"; and c) how your activity meets best strategies for teaching listening or speaking based upon what you have learned in the ELT course. |
| Lesson Plan #1: Listening, Speaking, and Pronunciation Activities | You will pair up with another classmate to design a lesson plan that integrates listening, speaking, and pronunciation. The lesson plan should also include one metacognitive activity.<br><br>The lesson plan template will be given to you.<br><br>Based on a short listening track/video/audio recording, you and your partner will choose a short 2-4 minute listening text that will invite learners to practice their listening, speaking and pronunciation skills through interaction and collaboration. |
| Lesson Plan #2: Integrative Skills Activity in Reading, Writing, & Vocabulary | You have the choice to work alone, pair up with a classmate, or work in a group of three to design a lesson plan that integrates reading, writing, and vocabulary instruction.<br><br>The lesson plan template will be given to you.<br><br>Design activities that will invite learners to practice their reading, writing, and vocabulary development through interaction and collaboration. |