

A Contemporary Educational Network for Professional Development

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Abstract— As seen in every aspect of life, technology has triggered revolutionary developments that shape and direct learning environments. Development of information technologies and the Internet has triggered the spread of the languages all around the world through online communication. This has made the English language one of the most popular international languages that has become the most widely taught and learnt language ever. The English language has been embedded into national curriculum either as a required course or as an instructional medium in many countries. In teaching English as a foreign language (EFL) foreign language teachers are looking for innovative ways to involve the developing technology in the language teaching process in order to support their students' learning as well as their professional development. As a social learning network, Edmodo, with millions of users worldwide stands out as a platform used frequently by educators and researchers. In relevant literature there is limited study focusing on teacher perception of Edmodo use in terms of professional development in EFL context. This study aims to obtain in-depth data including teachers opinions based on Edmodo use for their professional development. The data gained from the study might provide ideas for educators to make Edmodo more effective by revealing its most preferred, most commonly used features. In this study, as one of the qualitative methods, phenomenological research method is used. This is because the topic is about the individuals' first hand experiences and phenomenology focuses on the interpretations of those experiences regarding a phenomenon. The interviews, conducted with five EFL teachers, revealed mostly positive perceptions regarding Edmodo. According to majority of the participants, networks like Edmodo provide opportunities for life-long learning, international collaboration, keeping up-to-date, time and space independent communication, and convenience for getting mutual help and sharing.

Index Terms—Edmodo, EFL teacher, collaboration, professional development

I. INTRODUCTION

The English language has become a 'lingua franca'. This term explains the people who are not native speakers of English but who use English for intercultural communication and these people are the world's largest English-using population [1]. According to [2] approximately about a third of the world's population is now able to communicate at a useful level in English. Therefore, English language has become a part of primary, secondary or higher education curriculum either as a required course or as an instructional medium in many countries such as, Japan, China, Qatar, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and many other Asian countries [3; 4; 5]. This

triggered educators to find innovative ways to enhance their teaching process in each country [6] by embedding information and communication technologies (ICT) into their teaching "to create contemporary learning environment modernizing current teaching techniques, materials, methods, assessment tools and etc." [7] All these innovations triggered the creation of educational networks such as Edmodo. These social networks are designed for educational purposes and help educators combine, modify and share course materials and practical tools in order to enhance their teaching.

Social networks can occur anywhere, anytime, allowing people to engage in personal and professional relationships with each other. People have always used different ways and methods to establish a social network. The appeal of the development of Internet technologies are the structures that make it easier for users of increasing social networks to cooperate with each other [8]. In addition, educational networks, where personal information and experiences are shared, and virtual communities are created by connecting with peers, have become widespread and become a basic communication tool. The rise of Web 2.0 and social networking sites over the last decade has inspired new opportunities to enhance professional development. Thanks to new media it has become a lot easier and more convenient for teachers to communicate, collaborate and provide assistance. Web 2.0 helps educators become more curious about their own learning by providing them with platforms where they can collaborate and participate to share what they know and to learn from their colleagues [9]. The promising features of these educational social networking sites align well with social constructivist approaches to learning [10] because by means of these features teachers can participate in spaces rich in discussion and thanks to diffused leadership these platforms provide, those with knowledge of a topic can help others as needed. Many researchers point out that using educational networks, like Edmodo, in education is useful not only for students but also for teachers and instructors [11] and these networks present flexible, borderless, and innovative atmosphere to create collaborative environments [12].

II. EDMODO

Edmodo is a social networking platform designed for educational purposes. As a free and secure virtual learning environment, Edmodo lets teachers and students to communicate and collaborate outside the classroom. It has a user-friendly interface, which is quite similar to Facebook, another popular social networking platform. Edmodo, which has the largest number of users among other educational social networks, is a K-12 social learning

platform where teachers, students and parents can be found together [13]. There are 100 million users in 400 000 schools in 190 countries around the world [13]. Edmodo provides teachers with a safe environment where they can share all kinds of interactive materials, gather homework, perform many in-class activities such as quizzes, discussions [13]. Edmodo, unlike other social networks, does not want too much personal information to minimize the security problems that may arise for users [14].

On Edmodo, teachers can open classes as closed groups, share the class code with their students for practical enrollment. Not only classes, but also many other closed subgroups for various purposes such as discussions, sharing materials, collaborating etc. can be opened on the platform. Thanks to many handy functions of Edmodo, teachers can create exercises, quizzes, polls and alerts, and they can start discussions, assign homework, share links and files, store materials in their libraries and more importantly they can track progress of their students. Also, "E-portfolios of writing, speaking and listening contributions, which would be otherwise rather difficult to assess in real time by the teacher, can be uploaded on the platform and contribute to a finer, more objective assessment process." [15]

[16] mentions the terms used for people of this century who spend time online as follows: "We have had digital or cybecitizens, netizens (from internet and citizens), digital natives, homo digitalis, digital youth, and generation Y, to name a few." Created by Nic Borg and Jeff O'Hara in 2008, Edmodo aims to combine connectedness of 21st century with teaching and learning [17]. This educational networking platform is similar to Facebook in many ways, yet it is more secure and private for a learning environment because teachers can create closed groups as classes with a group code. This allows only teachers to create and manage accounts, and only those students with a group code can access and join the group.

Based on a review of some studies, significant influence of social networks on teachers' professional development was found. The studies reveal the fact that social networks make teachers more open to new ideas and concepts and teachers understand, perceive and modifying practices to fit in their own context. Also these networking sites have the potential for a learning community to support each by sustaining commitment to the community or activity [18].

Edmodo consists of 12 different subject communities that provide a safe space for teachers to share their knowledge, resources, ideas, course materials, worksheets, suggestions, experiences and they can ask questions or solicit ideas on the community wall [19]. There are between 90,000 and 500,000 registered users of these communities. These communities represent different interest areas such mathematics, linguistics, information technologies, social studies, science, world languages, career and technology education, health, creative arts, special education, college preparation, personal development [20]. "When a member joins a community, all of the posts from that community are sent via RSS feed directly to the member's personal profile page so they can

keep up to date on all of the community posts without ever leaving the profile page." [20]

Teachers on Edmodo can also benefit from the Edmodo Library, which has unlimited space. The library allows teachers to upload, store, organize, collect, manage documents, and view all of them on any device.

Studies that focused on evaluation of Edmodo from teachers' perspective revealed positive findings. A study revealed findings regarding the perceptions of teachers at 4 higher education institutions. The teachers recommended educators use Edmodo in their courses and they suggested that school administrations should encourage their staff to use Edmodo by giving seminars to introduce the platform [20]. Similarly, teachers in another study [15] favored Edmodo's features that provided them with effective monitoring, timely guiding, and customization of the activities according to the learners' proficiency levels. They were also content with the safe platform where students could maximize their learning time. Edmodo has been compared with different educational social networks [19]. With a range of 12 different subject areas in which teachers can share with each other through the online interface, Edmodo was found to be a professional site that is used in teacher learning. In another study, prospective teachers stated their positive opinions about the use of Edmodo. According to the views of the participants Edmodo can be used as an online virtual environment in teacher training [21]. In another study findings indicated that as a user-friendly website, Edmodo, promoted communication between teachers with its practical use [22].

In relevant literature there is limited study focusing on teacher perception of Edmodo use in terms of professional development in EFL context. This study, including EFL teachers aimed to obtain in-depth data on the use of Edmodo for professional development. The data gained from the study might provide ideas to educators to make Edmodo more effective by revealing its most preferred, most commonly used features. The study intended to gather data related to the following research question:

1. What are the perceptions of EFL teachers on Edmodo use in language classrooms in terms of professional development?

III. METHOD

This study was constructed in a qualitative research design to serve the purpose of the research question. In this study, one of the qualitative research methods, phenomenological research method, is applied. The reason for this is the relevance of the subject to the experiences of the participants and the fact that phenomenology focuses on making sense of the experiences of individuals about a phenomenon, investigating the structures of consciousness in human experiences [23], describing what an individual experiences and how to describe the essence of individual experiences [24]. Thanks to this method, first-hand in-depth knowledge about the subject will be obtained through the meaningful insights made by the EFL teachers about the perception of Edmodo.

Phenomenology is closely related to philosophy, one of the theories that form the basis of qualitative research methods. The aim of phenomenological research is to define different ways in which people experience, interpret, understand and conceptualize a particular aspect of a phenomenon. Although teaching and learning in the field of education is a phenomenon known to everyone, our approach, understanding and interpretations may differ greatly. At this point, phenomenology tries to form the definition of the essence. With this definition, phenomenology aims at finding answers to the questions of what individuals have experienced and how they have experienced. In the phenomenological research, there is no need to defend any theory, to prove it or not. It just focuses on describing the phenomenon as closely as possible. One of the main reasons for the emergence of phenomenological research might be the fact that reality is trapped between the sterile environment in positive science research and the subjective approach [25]. In this study, Hermeneutical (Interpretive) Phenomenological Research method was applied. As pointed out in [26], the researcher in the interpretive phenomenology focuses on the experienced phenomenon and its meaning, that is, the researcher does not merely describes. The process also includes the interpretation [27]. In this method, the researcher listens, questions, observes and evaluates the individuals who experience the phenomenon. In this approach, it is aimed to give a rich value to the phenomenon through intuition [27]. Therefore, the researcher is actively involved in this process and contributes to the process. In the process of understanding, the researcher should not go beyond the concrete data at hand and it must be disciplined about not making over-meaning.

A. Participants

Data sources in phenomenological research are the primary people who experience the phenomenon that the research focuses on and those who can reflect these experiences [28]. Two criteria were determined in the study. The first one is that the participant should have at least ten years of work experience as an EFL teacher and the second one is that the participant should have used Edmodo for at least 5 academic years. When conducting a phenomenological investigation, according to [29], the number of participants must be limited to a minimum of three and a maximum of six. By this way it is possible to access sufficient information through intensive interviews. Therefore, 5 volunteer EFL teachers from a state university who accepted the interview invitation took part in the research. The teachers' years of experience in language teaching ranged from 10 to 21. All participants had been using Edmodo in their language classes for 5 years.

B. Data Collection

For qualitative data collection, 30-45 minute interviews were conducted with 5 language teachers. Semi-structured

interviews were carried out by adopting a phenomenological approach. By applying this approach during the interviews, researcher aimed to find detailed answers to the questions of what individuals experienced and how they experienced it. Recorded interviews were transcribed for text analysis, and then important statements, which were believed to define the phenomenon, were identified. The researcher aimed to reveal the true experiences with these important expressions. These expressions were grouped together to create meaningful

TABLE I.
PARTICIPANTS AND THEIR YEARS OF EXPERIENCE

Participants	Years of experience
Teacher 1	12
Teacher 2	10
Teacher 3	16
Teacher 4	21
Teacher 5	19

units (codes). The same process was repeated for each participant and the texts were continuously revised throughout the process. Once all the codes have been obtained, the themes thought to describe the event were created.

The interviews were planned according to the availability of the participants. Open-ended questions were directed to the participants. As the number of participants was not high, the researcher conducted longer interviews, which took approximately 30 to 45 minutes to retrieve the data. The participants responded to two open-ended questions during the dialogue-based, unstructured, interactive interviews. The questions focused on how satisfied they were with Edmodo use in EFL teaching context and how they used Edmodo for their professional development.

IV. FINDINGS

The content analysis of the interview responses revealed the teacher participants' opinions about the use of Edmodo in EFL context in terms of their professional development. Table 2 shows positive important expressions of teachers on the use of Edmodo for professional purposes, and the codes and themes created by the researcher based on those expressions.

TABLE II.
POSITIVE TEACHER RESPONSES

important statements	codes	themes
Whenever there is a new classroom tool or new application that is worth trying, I immediately share it on Edmodo for other colleagues' benefit and they do the same. This platform makes it easy to share what is new in seconds.	easy to share new developments related to the profession practical platform to search for specific topics	keeping up-to-date
There are many groups on Edmodo such as EFL, English Language Arts, Foreign Language, Grammar, Spelling, and Writing. I follow most of these groups. It is really practical to find what I am looking for thanks to these specific groups.	provides communication opportunities easy to access works on any device	practical search
Technology allows us to transverse distance and gives us an opportunity to come closer.	provides interaction with other colleagues world wide	communication
Any device would be ok to use Edmodo, it can be used on mobile devices and this is a great convenience for us.	good for professional development	practical use
Some colleagues in different countries share their bright ideas related to preparing quizzes or extra materials on certain grammar points. These shares make my work incredibly easy. Every day I learn something new about my profession. This platform is not just for our students' learning. We are learning new things from other colleagues at any moment.	helps create professional community	sharing information
Edmodo offers professional development webinars and I benefit them a lot. There are a lot of training sessions on new technology and we learn a lot from each other during peer collaboration. It helps me get student perspective and practice the introduced tools.	fosters collaboration	professional community
With teachers from different countries as members of certain groups we are able to communicate and share course material, plans, ideas. In this way, <u>you have a professional social environment</u> .	opportunities for life long learning	collaboration
This platform fosters interactivity, collaboration and participation.	convenient for getting help from other colleagues	life long learning
The professional development unit in our school initiated small teacher group work on Edmodo. Those teachers who share the same classes can keep in touch with each other on Edmodo and we keep track of our students' performance, we can discuss about our students' weaknesses etc.	providing community support	help each other
In our institution we use Edmodo for our teacher group, it is the best way of sharing information.	provides easy connection with other teachers	connecting others
Edmodo lets teachers all over the world contact, reach across the ocean, learn and collaborate with teachers around the world.	convenient platform for sharing ideas	learning through discussions
There are posts about open online courses on many different subjects related to my profession. They are opportunities for life long learning. Sometimes I try taking those courses and they contribute to my teaching! I keep learning all the time!	enhances learning provides opportunities to get help from others	
It is an amazing resource. Teachers can use it anywhere in the world. I have shared lots of course materials with many colleagues around the world so far and they have shared with me their materials, experiences, lesson tips and sources.	promotes learning through discussions	
Thanks to Edmodo, my lessons became more active and connecting with both students and other colleagues is great.		
My all classes really enjoy the ease of sharing work on Edmodo. We are able to do quizzes and other assignments using it. Teachers can easily share resources with each other. When we are in need of help about a specific issue such as finding an appropriate app or how to organize a specific group project, we consult each other on Edmodo. Many teachers around the world share what they know and this is amazing.		
Edmodo has enhanced my classroom in more ways than one. Highly recommended for all language teachers. I keep learning new things related to my job every day by following the new posts on the main page.		
Sometimes Edmodo staff posts discussion topics such as "How do you maintain your work/life balance and mental health?" As teachers in many schools we start discussing about the topic from our own perspectives. These posts help us support each other by giving advice. Edmodo helps us create a huge community of EFL teachers.		

V. DISCUSSION

Content analysis of the interviews revealed positive opinions regarding Edmodo use for professional development in EFL context, which is similar to the relevant literature that focuses on teacher perception [15; 20]. Participants' responses can be merged under four main themes, which are: practicality, enhancing life-long learning, convenient communication, forming collaborative communities.

The participants focused on user-friendly features of Edmodo by pointing out how practical it is to keep in touch with their students and other teachers around the world. This feature of the platform might promote interaction among teachers and educators in language teaching and learning context. Also, teachers find Edmodo quite practical in terms of reaching resources, sharing course materials, searching for specific topics in interest communities and organizing their library. As the platform works perfectly on all devices, they emphasize that they can easily keep up-to-date information and stay in touch with other colleagues. They expressed that their colleagues could easily access the content they shared because the platform supported almost all media.

Participants also underlined that Edmodo helps them learn new things related to their profession. They claim that they can keep up-to-date with the informative posts from either other educators or the Edmodo professional development team. This is important because "Only the teachers who are continua to improve their practice, skills, and instructional strategies can successfully help others learn." [19] Teachers point out professional development webinars on Edmodo to be highly beneficial as they keep them up-to-date with the new classroom technologies. They emphasized that webinars increase their enthusiasm for teaching as they learn new classroom practices every day. This type of professional development that is initiated by individuals themselves might be more effective and long lasting than the one initiated top down.

As many other communication technologies, Edmodo platform seems to be enhancing communication among teachers by making distances closer, which is a similar finding with [22]. Teachers state that they have chances to meet other teachers, consult professionals about their job-related problems, get help from experts on Edmodo by means of easy messaging, discussion boards and other communication tools that allow teachers to engage in social learning, giving every teacher a chance to speak up.

Participants also pointed out the importance of collaboration in their profession. This collaboration is possible among teachers all around the world since hundreds of teachers can meet, communicate and start working together on Edmodo. According to participants comments it is very likely to meet another EFL teacher from another country and design collaborative projects that provide their learners with the opportunities of practicing English outside the classroom. The participants underlined similar advantages of Edmodo related to collaboration in literature [19] as they claimed thanks to main message board in the interest communities, they could easily engage in collaborative tasks.

This study revealed that educational networking sites promote professional development in many ways by creating online learning spaces where teachers from all around the world connect, help and support each other.

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