

Professionalism in Foreign Language Teaching: An Everlasting Challenge

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Abstract

This qualitative, exploratory study is aimed at inquiring the issue of professionalism of university English language professors. Previous research indicates that professionalism in English Language Teaching (ELT) has been a concern for the academia; nonetheless, new demands in the ELT career require teachers to constantly upgrade their performance in order to comply with higher education standards. Hence, traits, pedagogical practices, professional development, and challenges of these professionals are shown in this paper. Through a questionnaire, results revealed that participants felt satisfied with most of the newest teaching competencies. This study also identifies flaws in some teaching fields, which could be improved with professional development updates.

Key words: English Language Teaching (ELT), higher education, teaching competencies, pedagogical practices, professional development

Resumen

Este estudio de tipo cualitativo y exploratorio indaga el profesionalismo de académicos universitarios. Ciertos estudios anteriores indican que el profesionalismo en la enseñanza del inglés ha sido un área de interés en la academia; no obstante, las nuevas demandas de esta profesión requieren docentes que se actualicen permanentemente para cumplir con las

normas en educación superior. A través de este estudio, se analizaron las cualidades, prácticas pedagógicas, desarrollo profesional y algunos desafíos de estos profesionales. Los resultados del cuestionario aplicado indican que los participantes están satisfechos con las competencias de enseñanza más actuales. A la vez, el estudio identifica algunos desafíos en ciertos campos de la enseñanza, los cuales se pueden mejorar a través de actualizaciones en el desarrollo profesional.

Palabras claves: enseñanza del idioma inglés, educación universitaria, competencias de enseñanza, prácticas pedagógicas, desarrollo profesional

Introduction

For decades, the field of teaching English as a foreign language has been under the microscope of the academia that constantly set the standards to evaluate teachers' traits, skills, attitudes, competencies, and practices. Even though professionals in this field have obtained a degree to undertake the practices in their field, great inquiry always arouses: What traits, attitudes and skills do teachers have to develop to cope with the trends in language teaching? How do teachers commit to their work to improve their teaching practices? How can they show professionalism in sight of today's demands and challenges for reinventing educational performance? Indeed, this profession evokes values, beliefs, intercultural understanding, motivation, and commitment to successfully comply with the mission of education. In this respect, Hardy (2011) said:

Language teaching is a career that requires specialized skills. First, we need a high level of proficiency in the language we teach, but proficiency alone isn't enough. We also need explicit, declarative knowledge about the language in order to teach

it. Finally, we need to know something about the principles of second language acquisition and language teaching methodology. (p. 246)

In fact, being qualified in ELT depends upon knowledge, training, experience, dedication and vocation. Within the scope of this research study, it is essential to inquire what makes a teacher a well-qualified professional in higher education. The purpose of this paper is twofold: to evaluate the competencies and traits which teachers possess; and to identify continuous professional development activities, contributing to excellence in ELT. To accomplish this objective, a group of university professors was surveyed to address the following research questions:

- RQ1. How do teachers value their own professional practices?
- RQ2. What qualities, competencies and pedagogical practice make teachers good professionals?
- RQ3. What kind of activities do teachers pursue for professional development?
- RQ4. What should EFL teachers do to upgrade their teaching experience?

As an everlasting challenge, professionals in ELT need to cope with trends in methodologies and approaches, technological innovations, and curricular realities to reach quality in higher education.

Review of Literature

Research has widely aimed at professionalism in second language teaching during the last decades. Toledo and Favela (2008) categorized teachers' competencies in several categories:

- *Pedagogical knowledge:* technological use, explanation of social reality, and logical thinking.
- *Social interaction:* socializing, conflict resolution, and interculturality.
- *Teaching organization:* planning and evaluation
- *Pedagogical mediation:* attention to students' needs and interests, and strategies and ways of working
- *Communication:* language skills
- *Professional development:* continuous education

Even though scholars in ELT have normed teachers' qualifications and competencies, it is a concern whether all teachers reach the highest standards of performance and improvement. Previous studies conducted in this field have analyzed certain factors that affect professionalism: unqualified preparation, lack of vocation, limited monetary incentives, and undervalued profession. Nonetheless, one of the greatest interests for this research is the fact that some teachers still need to comply with the standards of

excellence and commitment in second language teaching and the demands of higher education institutions.

In the same vein, teachers are expected to have positive attitudes, knowledge, and commitment to face challenging responsibilities in new paradigms in teaching. Teachers, in fact, must strive for lifelong learning in order to strengthen their professional knowledge and teaching styles. They should focus more on analytical and reflective understanding of their performance. Likewise, they should become agents of educational renewal or change by actively getting involved in critical analysis, reflection and creative response to their teaching. According to Vanassche and Kelchtermans (2014), "professionalism manifests itself in teacher educators' actions and behaviors. [This] is reflected in four questions: 'what happens?'; 'why is this happening?'; 'what do we think of this and why?'; and 'should we try to change this practice, and why would this change be an improvement?'" (p. 118).

Professional development empowers teachers to engage in the rebuilding of their faculty goals and the implementation of innovative teaching practices. As Hardy (2011) expressed, "The roles of teachers and schools are changing, and so are expectations about them: teachers are asked to teach in increasingly multicultural classrooms, integrate students with special needs, use ICT for teaching effectively, engage in evaluation and accountability processes (...)" (p. 7).

Once the new demands are identified, teachers must find the path toward integrating these expectations into their teaching performance. Bearing this goal in mind, professionals

should feel motivated and satisfied with reinventing their practice, which is a process led by thoughtful analysis and reflection on their weaknesses and strengths. The Advisory Committee on Teacher Education and Qualifications (2003) stated:

Equally important is the teacher's passion for continuous learning and self-improvement. In this era of knowledge expansion, globalization, high technology and rapid social transformation, the belief in effective learning as an ongoing process is a fundamental tenet of professionalism in teaching. Also, personal growth and self-management widen horizons, enrich the experience of life and lay a solid foundation for the move towards fuller professionalism. (p. 8)

From the lecture called *Motivation toward Professional Development*, attended by the researchers, the former executive director of SINAES1 claimed that teachers have transformed from being classroom givers to college professors and from knowledge providers to mediators in the construction of knowledge. He also described several characteristics professionals in the field of teaching should have: (a) interdisciplinary education to enrich the knowledge acquired through different contents; (b) experiences in collaborative projects; (c) advancement in career path; (d) teamwork; (e) correlation between teaching research and outreach projects; (f) sensibility to the students' needs; (g) assertive communication; and (h) pedagogical-didactic innovation, among others (G. Alfaro, personal communication, June 14, 2016).

Upgrading the teaching career is a paramount initiative for teachers themselves and university standards and norms. As a result, it is expected from ELT professionals to constantly evaluate their performance for ongoing development.

Methodology

This study is exploratory and qualitative in nature as it intends to gather data on the features which make ELT teachers professional. From the participant professors' appraisal, a series of qualifications were surveyed through an online questionnaire designed by the researchers. It collected data on personal information, teaching competencies, pedagogical practices, and professional development activities. Also, participants were requested to assess characteristics that make them excel in their work, and to identify today's challenges in education.

The questionnaire consisted of 10 items; the first four items included personal questions: age, level of education, experience, and place of work. Then, a fifth item consisted of 10 statements of levels of satisfaction with teaching competences that were ranked with a Likert scale. Another item surveyed the main traits of great teachers. The next item was aimed at inquiring what teachers do to continue with their professional development; and the last three items were open-ended questions which intended to collect insights about their weaknesses in their teaching performance, the improvements of their pedagogical practices, and challenges in ELT (see *Appendix A*). In order to elicit straightforward,

truthful answers, the respondents were assured that their responses would remain anonymous.

This type of evaluation was carried out through an online survey, considering factors such as time constraints and professors' preference in collaborating with other colleagues' research, and the range of workplaces of participants in the study. The survey was piloted with the support of five colleagues, who were requested to provide feedback to the content and format of the instrument. Corrections were made, and the survey was sent to a 30-participant sample, from which 20 professors successfully completed it.

Results

Participant personal information

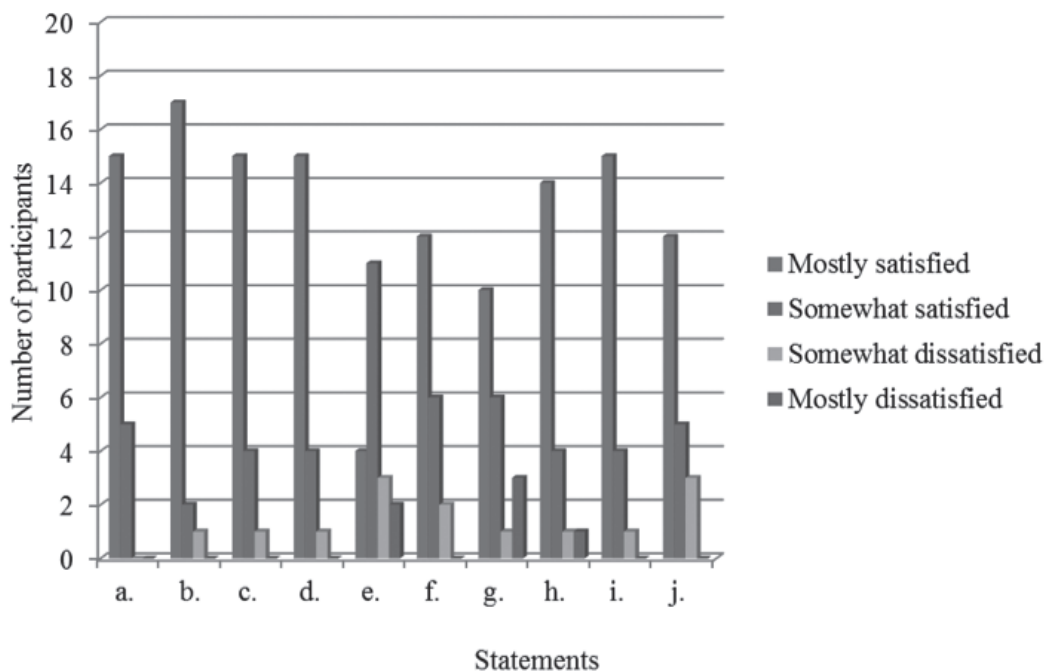
The majority of the participants works at public universities in Costa Rica (ten at UNA, five at UCR, three at UTN, and one at UNED), and one of them at a private university. Regarding their age, 15% are in their late twenties, 40% in their thirties, 30% in their forties, and 15% in their fifties. About their teaching experience at university level, 40% of the professors have worked above 16 years, 30% between 11 and 15 years, 25% between 6 to 10, and 5% less than 5 years. Sixteen of these professors hold a master's degree, two of them a *licenciatura*² degree, and two of them a doctorate's degree.

Teaching practices

Participants were asked to rank their level of satisfaction with ten teaching competency statements in

their profession, by choosing one of the four rating levels: *mostly satisfied*, *somewhat satisfied*, *somewhat dissatisfied*, and *mostly dissatisfied* (see *Figure 1*). The statements were analyzed by sorting them from those competencies ranked as the highest to the lowest. First of all, the highest level of satisfaction is shown for developing language awareness to confidently analyze language usage, statement chosen by 17 participants. Furthermore, 15 participants are mostly satisfied with four other practices: applying the attributes of a holistic educator, updating teaching and learning strategies, creating and maintaining a constructive learning environment, and complying with the standards and policies of higher education. Likewise, understanding the school goals to take on professional roles and responsibilities was ranked by 14 participants as being mostly satisfied. Even though 12 participants pointed out that they reflect on their strengths and weaknesses, and apply research to improve their own teaching, the rest of the professors do not feel that satisfied with these two practices. Additionally, only 50% of the participants show highest levels of satisfaction for building collegiality to enhance the faculty goals. Finally, using the newest technological innovations for teaching was the competence which professors felt somewhat satisfied with, chosen by 11 participants. In sum, competencies were ranked as mostly satisfied by the majority of participants; however, lowest levels of satisfaction were shown in key competencies, which deserves a reflection to find out the reasons why some professors still feel dissatisfied.

**Figure 1. Level of satisfaction with teaching practices.
Questionnaire, September, 2016**



- a. Applying the attributes of a holistic educator
- b. Developing language awareness to confidently analyze language usage
- c. Updating teaching and learning strategies
- d. Creating and maintaining a constructive learning environment
- e. Using the newest technological innovations for teaching
- f. Reflecting on strengths and weaknesses as a teacher
- g. Building collegiality to enhance the faculty goals
- h. Understanding the school goals to take on professional roles and responsibilities
- i. Complying with the standards and policies of higher education
- j. Applying research to improve own teaching

Professional traits

A shift from the traditional classroom environment to a type of teaching aimed at growing, discovering and broadening students' horizons is needed. Based on the framework of holistic education, whose focus is on meeting the needs of individual learners to fulfill their life experiences, participants referred to some qualities of a holistic educator in *item 6*. They mentioned the following: creativity, responsibility, motivation, enthusiasm, commitment, affection, hard work, and reflection. As illustrated by one of the participants, "I am sure that a professor must be humble and humanistic so that students do not feel that they are somehow inferior. If a professor makes students feel confident, the learning

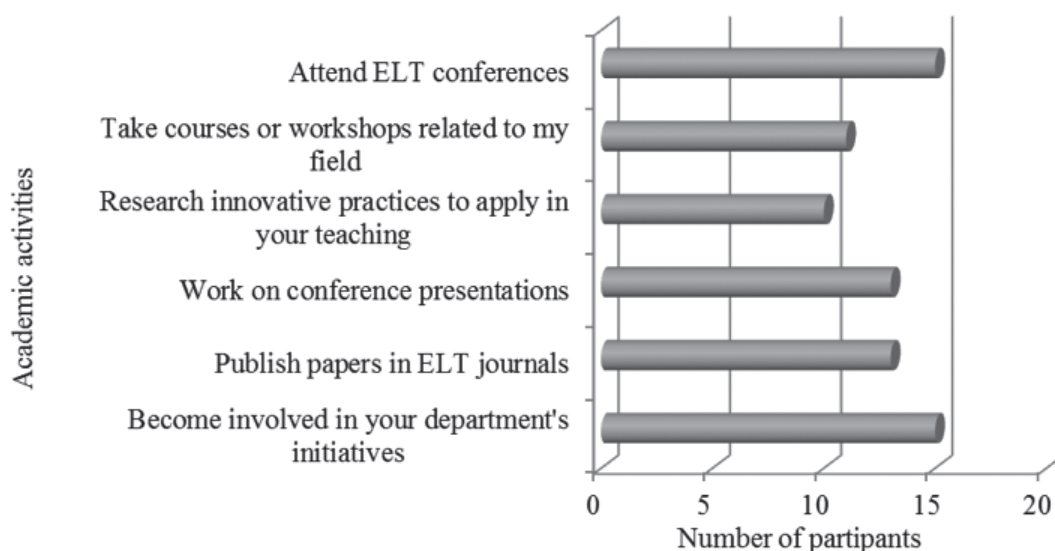
process is enhanced.” Moreover, they feel confident in accepting innovation as part of the work.

Professional development activities

In *item 7*, professors were asked about what type of actions they resort to for growing in their career. They were provided six of the most expected academic activities for professional growth, from which they were able to

select the ones they perform per year (see *Figure 2*). Fifteen professors chose attending ELT conferences and becoming involved in the department’s initiative as the most effective activities for professional growth. Another thirteen professors consider taking courses or workshops related to their field and researching innovative practices to apply in their teaching as actions to improve their career.

**Figure 2. Activities done for professional development.
Questionnaire, September, 2016**



Nonetheless, professors reported low frequency in doing some activities as publishing papers in ELT journals (selected by 11 participants), and working on conference presentations (selected by 10 participants). Another activity mentioned by one of the participants referred to reflecting on their teaching practices and student performance as a way to advance in their career.

Improvement in teaching practices

Finally, participants stated several aspects they considered essential points of departure toward enhancing their teaching performance in *item 8*. Most professors asserted being highly motivated to continue with their professional development; indeed, one stated, “Probably I have all I need, now it is a matter of taking the time and

do it. I mean, I have training, I have the resources and I have the institution's support;" also, another colleague expressed, "I truly believe that there is always room for improvement. Every day, I try to do things better, to learn from previous experiences and to include my students' preferences and interests into consideration."

Nevertheless, most professors agreed on the need for more training in technology applied to language teaching, specifically, the use of ICT's within the typical classroom environment and the implementation of virtual learning as a way to enhance the curriculum. More room for improvement is related to reinventing the teaching of vocabulary, writing, pronunciation, and culture.

Furthermore, participants were concerned with not having more time for research and academic publications (i.e. submitting papers for journals or publishing books for teaching), which in turn accounts for systematizing their professional experiences in order to become better reflective educators. This concern was illustrated in one of the participant's comments: "[teachers should be] more systematic when learning from class experiences to achieve higher standards." Time and work overload were considered the greatest constraints to enhance teaching practices.

In *item 9* professors were asked about the pedagogical practices recently reinvented. Coincidentally, areas like ICT's and virtual learning are described as aspects they have renewed in their teaching practice. Such results show that professors might have either received training in these areas or started using more technology in their classroom; however, they still need to

improve the use of these innovations. Even though professors do not feel as satisfied with the use of the newest technologies, as they do with the development of other teaching competencies, they still like to renovate in this educational area. Other pedagogical practices upgraded by professors are listed below:

- Ensuring student-centered clases.
- Learning about students' needs, like promoting dialogue with them.
- Giving feedback to and monitoring students' speech.
- Eliciting critical thinking.
- Promoting group work.
- Reflecting on new paradigms and approaches to ELT teaching.
- Implementing an analytical approach to teaching (i.e. constructing knowledge by researching).
- Using strategies for intercultural communication.
- Teaching poetry creatively.
- Assessing students' improvement.

As detailed, professors have actually made major changes from theory, regarding methods and approaches, to practice, in relation to pedagogical mediation. It can also be concluded that professors have updated the way they approach students, for instance, being aware of learners' needs and keeping track of their improvement. Participants in general have enhanced a myriad of aspects for more effective teaching practices.

Challenges in attaining professionalism

Item 10 referred to the challenges which hinder attaining standards in higher education. Participants

indicated some of them: keeping students engaged and motivated, developing student awareness of the importance of their major, dealing with student learning disabilities, and achieving the expected student language outcomes. Also, failing to work as a team prevents teachers from obtaining effective results; one professor said, "Collegiality is not always paramount for some teachers." According to one of the teacher participants, such demands can be perceived by teachers as concerns or even strains: "The access that students have to sources of information has put too much pressure on professors who sometimes are not able to cope with the students' demands and questions." It is a concern for professionals the fact of not being prepared to cope with learners who are achieving more autonomy. In fact, the above constraints need to be analyzed and discussed in order to enhance teaching performance.

Reflective Analysis

As stated by Krishnamurti (2008), "The highest function of education is to bring about an integrated individual who is capable of dealing with life as a whole" (p. 36). For this reason, most professors prefer holistic education to empower students for the challenges of today's life. Students learn about themselves, their success, healthy relationships, social and emotional development, among other concerns. This is the kind of education that has been successful nowadays according to Forbes (1996), Gallegos (1999), and Cenoz and Gorter (2011). Similarly, professionals in the field of second

language teaching have always innovated their teaching and learning strategies in order to comply with the most current theories and approaches. Above all, they pursue to create and maintain a constructive learning environment since an organized, safe and active classroom motivates learners to achieve academic and personal success. This effective teaching takes place when professionals comply with the standards and policies of higher education and strive for maintaining high levels of professionalism.

By conducting an analysis of teaching practices, professors gather information about their students' progress and instructional needs. According to Richards and Rogers (2001), the teacher's role in understanding students' needs and engaging them in their learning experiences includes: knowing the students and their interests, abilities and learning styles, planning classroom environment and routines, organizing resources, assessment and evaluation, and reflecting upon the effectiveness of their instruction. On the other hand, teachers also need to improve some pedagogical practices. One of these areas is working with colleagues. Lack of rapport with colleagues may result from the recurring tensions among individuals with differing ideologies and among groups of individuals with divergent priorities (Hughey *et al.*, 2013). Teachers also strive for incorporating innovative tools (e.g. ICT's) into their classroom. It could be inferred that certain teachers are comfortable with instructional strategies from the time they majored as professionals; as a result, they refuse to explore more innovative ones. Spencer (2012) asserted that some teachers

are not using technology for several reasons: fear, negative past experiences, few opportunities to learn, lack of research, and low self-efficacy. Being aware of these factors and properly addressing them in professional development activities, would allow teachers to strengthen their skills for accomplishing satisfaction in their practice.

Conclusion

Professionalism is revealed when teachers maintain a commitment to ethics, communicate effectively and participate in professional growth that results in enhanced student learning. Complying with higher education standards should not be seen as a compulsory call but as an opportunity for education quality.

This study has identified great teachers' competencies, traits and initiatives for professional development. The results of this study have drawn very positive insights about teachers' professionalism since most of them reach high standards of performance and comply with quality in education. Professional development is an essential key that leads teachers to become better every day. Transformation in teachers' beliefs and attitudes about teaching and instructional practices occur only after they feel empowered as they succeed in coping with today's requirements in second language teaching.

Most participants felt a great deal of satisfaction with their pedagogical practices. Also, the qualities mentioned for great teachers are the ones that have been pointed out by other researchers; this demonstrates that

the surveyed professors agree with the traits great teachers should possess. It is worth mentioning that attending ELT courses and participating in conferences and workshops have historically been very effective opportunities to motivate and encourage teachers to renovate their skills and reinforce positive attitudes. Teachers do not opt for writing papers for publication and presentations due to time constraints. Nonetheless, EFL professionals excel in their publications and papers presented in several conferences held in their universities.

In spite of all the positive results, professors acknowledged the need of improvement in certain areas. The domains in which upgrading is needed are correlated to aspects that they have reinvented. Although teachers actively become involved in professional development activities, they recognize feeling constrained with new demands and challenges in their field such as student engagement, motivation, language acquisition, learning disabilities, and collegiality. All of these areas should lead to reflection and improvement of the teaching career, and they can be addressed as topics in future professional development lectures or workshops.

Notes

1. *Sistema Nacional de Acreditación de la Educación Superior* (National Accreditation Service of Costa Rica): An institution that regulates education quality for graduate and postgraduate degree programs in this country.
2. A graduate degree attained after a bachelor's degree in Costa Rica.

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Appendix A

Questionnaire for Professors

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Researchers: Olga Chaves Carballo, Ph. D. and José David Rodríguez Chaves, M. A.

Description:

This questionnaire is part of a research paper aimed at collecting data on the traits, skills, attitudes, competencies, and teaching practices which make you a qualified professional in the field of English as a foreign language. Your collaboration and accuracy in completing the following anonymous questionnaire will be appreciated by the researchers.

1. Age:

- 20-29
- 30-39
- 40-49
- Above 50

2. Highest level of education:

- Lic.
- Master's degree
- Doctorate's degree

3. Years of teaching experience at university level:

- 1-5
- 6-10
- 11-15
- Above 16

4. Place of work:

- UNA
- UCR
- TEC
- UNED
- UTN
- Private university

5. Check the option that best represents the level of satisfaction with your teaching competences.

Statements	Mostly satisfied	Somewhat satisfied	Somewhat dissatisfied	Mostly dissatisfied
a. Applying the attributes of a holistic educator	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
b. Developing language awareness to confidently analyze language usage	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
c. Updating teaching and learning strategies	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
d. Creating and maintaining a constructive learning environment	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
e. Using the newest technological innovations for teaching	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
f. Reflecting on strengths and weaknesses as a teacher	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
g. Building collegiality to enhance the faculty goals	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
h. Understanding the school goals to take on professional roles and responsibilities	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
i. Complying with the standards and policies of higher education	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
j. Applying research to improve own teaching	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

6. What are three main traits that make you a great teacher?

a. _____ b. _____ c. _____

7. What do you do to continue with your professional development per year?
You can check more than one answer.

- Attend ELT conferences
- Take courses or workshops related to my field
- Research innovative practices to apply in your teaching
- Work on conference presentations
- Publish papers in ELT journals
- Become involved in your department's initiatives
- Other: _____

8. Is there anything that you need to improve in your teaching performance?
Indicate, please.

9. What are some pedagogical practices that you have recently reinvented?

10. What is one of the greatest challenges in attaining professionalism in ELT?