



SOCIAL

# PARADIGM

AN INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF SOCIAL SCIENCES

*Social Paradigm, 2024, 8 (1): 1-21*

## **The Issue of Creating and Implementing Innovations in ELT: The Unheard Voices of the Teachers**

*Vasif Karagüçük<sup>1</sup>*

*Huriye Yaşar<sup>2</sup>*

### **Abstract**

*It is a widely-known fact that the field of English Language Teaching (hereafter ELT) has witnessed quite many innovations. Each of them strived for some important gains for language learning and teaching, such as learner growth, teacher autonomy, professional development, and better evaluation procedures can be sampled. Besides their benefits to language learning and teaching, it is also important to take into account their time of life and diffusion of them in language classrooms. Up to now, the field of ELT can be considered as one of the most fertile territories in education studies due to the number of innovative ideas appeared. Moreover, the implementation process of these innovative ideas has always gained the title character. In other words, either “top-down” or “bottom-up” procedures were facilitated in language innovation implementation; the focal point was always the proper application of these innovations in the selected contexts. The creation of teacher-initiated innovations and the diffusion of fruitful ideas are somehow neglected to this point. The main aim of this study is to show an alternative way for the diffusion of innovation in the field of ELT. Additionally, some useful websites and social media accounts from Turkey were also provided for the teachers who are looking for locally-grown innovations for their teaching contexts. The related study also investigates what innovation is, and how innovations can be implemented and diffused. To conclude, for better innovation creation and diffusion, the teachers, who are the main authorities in the process of creation, implementation, and diffusion of the innovations should be sensed for the future of the field.*

**Keywords:** *English language teaching, innovation, diffusion, English teacher.*

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<sup>1</sup> Instructor, Gaziantep Islam Science and Technology University, vasif.karagucuk@gibtu.edu.tr, ORCID: 0000-0002-1532-8450

<sup>2</sup> Instructor, Gaziantep Islam Science and Technology University, huriye.yasar@gibtu.edu.tr, ORCID: 0000-0002-4143-1099

## İngilizce Öğretiminde Yenilikler Oluşturma ve Uygulama Sorunu: Öğretmenlerin Duyulmayan Sesi

### Öz

*İngilizce Öğretimi alanının (bundan sonra ELT olarak anılacaktır) birçok yeniliğe tanıklık ettiği yaygın olarak bilinen bir gerçektir. Her biri, dil öğrenimi ve öğretimi için öğrenci gelişimi, öğretmen özerkliği, mesleki gelişim ve daha iyi değerlendirme adımları gibi önemli kazanımlar sağlamaya çalışmıştır. Dil öğrenimi ve öğretimine sağladıkları faydaların yanı sıra, dil sınıflarında kullanıldıkları zaman ve yayımları da dikkate alınmalıdır. Şu ana kadar, ELT alanı, ortaya çıkan yenilikçi fikirlerin sayısı nedeniyle eğitim çalışmalarında en verimli bölgelerden biri olarak kabul edilebilir. Ayrıca, bu yenilikçi fikirlerin uygulama süreci her zaman karakter kazanmıştır. Başka bir deyişle, dil yeniliği uygulamasında ya "yukarıdan aşağı" ya da "aşağıdan yukarı" uygulamalar kolaylaştırılmıştır; odak noktası her zaman bu yeniliklerin seçilen bağlamlarda doğru bir şekilde uygulanması olmuştur. Öğretmen tarafından başlatılan yeniliklerin oluşturulması ve verimli fikirlerin yayılması bir şekilde bu noktaya kadar ihmal edilmiştir. Bu çalışmanın temel amacı, ELT alanında yeniliğin yayılması için alternatif bir yol göstermektir. Ayrıca, öğretim bağlamlarında yerel olarak geliştirilmiş yenilikler arayan öğretmenler için Türkiye'den bazı yararlı web siteleri ve sosyal medya hesapları da sağlandı. İlgili çalışma ayrıca yeniliğin ne olduğunu ve yeniliklerin nasıl uygulanıp yayılabileceğini araştırmaktadır. Sonuç olarak, daha iyi yenilik yaratma ve yayma için, yeniliklerin yaratılması, uygulanması ve yayılması sürecinde ana otorite olan öğretmenlerin alanın geleceği için dikkate alınması gerekmektedir.*

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** İngiliz dili eğitimi, yenilik, yayılım, İngilizce öğretmeni

*Received/Makale Geliş Tarihi: 10.10.2024*

*Accepted/Makale Kabul Tarihi: 25.11.2024*

### 1. Introduction

In today's globalized world, the issue of educational innovations in the field of language teaching has drawn noticeable attention (Bailey, 1992; Freeman & Cazden, 1990; Karagucuk, 2018; Kennedy, 1988; Markee, 1997; White, 1987; Yalcin-Tilfarlioglu & Karagucuk, 2019). Innovations in the field of ELT have three main branches. These are language teaching methodologies, the application of technology in language classrooms, and the growth of learner language development (Van den Branden, 2009).

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These three branches relatively led to one another. Before investigating each of them, it is advantageous to have a look at what innovations mean. As Rogers (2003) suggests an innovation can be described as an idea, practice, or item, that is considered as new by a person or other branch of adoption. This definition proposes that the changes that innovation brings to education should be applicable to a wide variety of conditions of educational processes. In other words, an innovation should have some characteristics to handle the excessive tasks of language education, such as pedagogical views, methodological options, the design of the curriculum, testing and evaluation, etc. To some extent, these definitions seem exhaustive for many teachers. From many teachers' point of view, an innovation can be described as an activity or idea, which improves the language learning of the students and the job satisfaction and professional development of the teachers. Therefore, it can be said that it is more advisable to judge innovations according to the benefits they bring to language classrooms instead of their over-complicated and inapplicable properties for every teaching context (Karagucuk, 2018). It has been seen that there is almost no aspect of foreign or second language instruction, which has not been subjected to educational innovations. Since the 1980s, the field of ELT faced a plenitude of innovations and these ideas formed three groups: language methodologies, the integration of technology in the language classrooms, and the procedures for assessment of the language. To start with, the field of ELT has witnessed quite many innovative language methodologies. Each of these methodologies appeared in the field due to the deficiencies in the previous ones, so they

tried to treat these weak points by implementing their fresh and innovative tools and techniques. When Communicative Language Teaching first emerged in the field, the main stage of the language classrooms was armed with authentic materials and meaning-based communication, and traditional grammar-focused teaching lost its place. Moreover, many of the innovative methodologies in ELT aimed to increase learner autonomy, more meaningful interaction between the learners, and enhance teacher performance. After all, these methodological innovations shed light on how classroom procedures can be constructed for more fruitful learning and teaching (Larsen-Freeman & Anderson, 2013). Therefore, even if the most traditional ones of these methodological innovations helped teachers, academicians, and educational authorities in the development of innovative classroom practices, so methodological innovations can be the starting point for language innovation implementation and diffusion. Towards the end of the twentieth century, the field of ELT blossomed again with the integration of modern technology. Computers, television, the internet, videos, apps, and virtual reality have been integrated into both foreign and second language domains in order to create more efficient language learning and teaching. These new tools were first integrated under the heading of Computer-Assisted Language Learning, and today, it is almost impossible to find a modern language classroom without these innovative tools or techniques. Additionally, new forms of language education like distance education and blended learning have brought new opportunities and conditions for more competent language teaching practices. Every modern language course book benefits from one or more

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of these innovative technological tools for the sake of creating long-lasting language instruction. Therefore, it is obvious that these technologies helped teachers maximize their teaching potential, and helped the learners form better language learning experiences (Van den Branden, 2009). The integration of technology also has accelerated the diffusion of innovative practices among teachers. Nowadays, there are plenty of social media groups, websites, forums, and blogs, which were primarily created for the diffusion of innovative ideas between teachers, and it is obvious that while the learners and teachers are utilizing these innovations, they are continuously developing themselves, and by sharing their experiences, they are opening new ways for more innovative language practices (Allwright, 2005). The last step for the innovation issue is the new assessment procedures for measuring learner growth in language education. Almost in all parts of the world, the quality of education is determined by the results of the assessment procedures, so the creation of more reliable and valid language testing procedures gained a great deal of importance (Burgess & Head, 2005). The innovation in assessment procedures has been seen in three main points. The first one is the new and innovative assessment practices, which focus on meaningful communication in real-life situations, such as performance-based language assessment procedures. The second one is innovative testing procedures, which aim to create learner autonomy and initiative in language teaching such as portfolio, self-assessment, and alternative testing. The final one is the utilization of multimedia to create more valid and reliable testing procedures. All in all, pedagogical articles and

handbooks, specialized tools, second and foreign language research, in-service and pre-service training programs, internet communication, and conferences have catalyzed the process of innovation implementation and diffusion in language classrooms. With the help of this study, the importance of the creation and the diffusion of locally grown educational innovations by the teachers was put into question and some practical and alternative ways to increase their efficiency of them were discussed.

## **2. Literature Review**

The introduction part of the study has shown that the field of ELT has seen methodological innovations, which are concerned with how language education should be organized; technological innovations, which are primarily interested in the curriculum; the innovations in testing, which have involvement with infrastructural and contextual variables in evaluation. Apart from in which aspects of the language they brought new and insightful ideas, as Van Den Branden (2009) suggests any educational innovation should be questioned in terms of the learning (from the students' perspective) and the professional development (from the educators' perspective) they stimulate. Moreover, if innovations in the field of ELT are questioned in line with the benefits that they would possibly bring to the language classroom, it is more possible to free the field from these three over-generalized types of innovations. According to our personal point of view, anything (i.e. an activity, task, tool, technique, idea, material, and app) can be considered as innovative; as long as it facilitates language learning and increases the efficiency of the language

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instruction as well as they are profitable for the professional and continuous development of the practitioners.

An innovation also fundamentally differs from a change because an innovation should have a goal-directed nature, and it should deliberately aim for improvement both in the eyes of the teachers and the learners. In other words, an educational innovation is only worthwhile, if it facilitates better learning results for the students and professional development opportunities for the teachers. From these characteristics, any innovation in language classrooms should possess some qualifications. Borg (2006), Ellis (2003), Markee (1997), and Rogers (2003) summarize them as follows:

Firstly, any educational innovation should have some degree of relative advantages for the adaptation of it. From an educational point of view, innovation includes gains in terms of time management, workload, educational effectiveness, personal prestige, and gains. More importantly, from the very beginning, teachers should perceive innovations as worthwhile and advantageous for both their learners and themselves. Secondly, it is better if the innovation, that was decided to be implemented, is compatible with the educators' prior experience and the conditions of the educational domain. These characteristics propose that innovations should not be too different from the local educational philosophy, teachers' existing practices, beliefs, and the socio-cultural context. In other words, innovations should have a moderate level of newness for the learners, the teachers, and the context. It has also been seen that teachers are inclined to smooth transitions rather than sudden

jumps into innovations. Next, the complexity of the innovation has a major role in the implementation process. Innovations, that are easy to understand, have more probability of adaptation. The teachers are also provided with some conceptual maps of the new tools and ideas because if the teachers completely internalize what they are about to do in the classroom, they would have fewer concerns about the innovations. Trialability is another characteristic that an innovation should have. This term is about the allowed time and space for trying the innovation. Before the whole implementation of the innovations, it is advised to carry them out in smaller contexts and verify the expected results. The teachers also need to have some kind of freedom to try these innovations in their own contexts without worrying too much about the constraints emerging from the educational authorities. The observability of an innovation is concerned with the examples, which are provided for the teachers. In other words, if the teachers have a chance to see the actual implementation of the innovation in the classroom context, it would be more possible for the innovation to be accepted by the educators. Feasibility is another aspect of innovation, and any innovation should have some degree of practicality. Innovations should also be compatible with some practical constraints, such as class sizes, available time, and teaching aids. Additionally, concreteness is the extent of innovations coming into existence in actual classroom actions. The educators need a clear picture of what is going to happen in the classroom, and what the consequences of the classroom procedures are, so the teachers should be provided with some practical classroom procedures. The final characteristic of an



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innovation should possess is the problem-orientedness of an educational innovation. In fact, every educational innovation came into existence due to the problems in the educational contexts, and they provided solutions for them for the sake of forming more efficient language learning and teaching. To sum up, innovations need to have some characteristics in order to be implemented by entrepreneurs. Moreover, after the verification of the required components, there are some steps to follow in the innovation implementation process.

If an educational innovation was seen as a worthwhile venture, the implementation process would take the stage. Rogers (2003) proposes four gradual steps (persuasion, decision, implementation, and confirmation) for the implementation of an educational innovation. In the first step, persuasion, a positive attitude towards the selected innovation is formed in the eyes of both educational authorities and teachers. After that, in the step of decision, whether the implementation of the decided innovation is put into usage in educational contexts or not (adopt or reject the innovation). In the step of implementation, the new ideas and insights are tested, and finally, in the step of confirmation, the expected benefits are gained from the implemented innovation, the results should be diffused for achieving more widespread gains for other educational contexts. It was also seen that even the most precise educational innovations could be developed and perfectionized in the innovation diffusion process. In other words, every stakeholder in the process of innovation implementation and diffusion adds their new and original ideas to redispense the innovation into higher places. In fact, this trajectory is the

same as the basic framework of science. As we all know, every development in the field of science comes into their existing level systematically, different practitioners created these small improvements for the purpose of contributing to science. In other words, every practitioner in the innovation diffusion process interprets the innovation in new and different ways, and after a while, the related innovations have transformed into something totally new and more productive.

Fullan (2001) also proposed gradual steps for the implementation of educational innovations. There are three successive steps in it (initiation, actual implementation, and institutionalization). The first step is initiation in which the innovation begins through in-service training or school policy. The teachers and educational authorities are persuaded to show the significant gains that the innovation possesses. After that in the step of actual implementation, the decided innovation is applied in real classroom contexts and the results are shared with the educational stakeholders. In the final step, institutionalization, if the innovation passes through the first two steps successfully, the implementation of the related innovation becomes a widespread procedure in everyday classroom practice. Finally, yet importantly, the chief point in all innovation processes is taking the implementers (the teachers') consent and ideas about the innovations. As Markee (1997) suggests 75 percent of the educational innovations died out because either innovations are forced as mandatory classroom practices, or teachers' voices are unheard in the processes of both creation and implementation of the selected innovations. For the sake of forming more competent innovations in terms of creating, implementing, and

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diffusing them, the real entrepreneurs, who are the teacher-researchers, should be empowered in all these steps for the future of ELT. As Rogers (2003) suggests, if educational stakeholders just prefer adopting innovations rather than creating and diffusing innovations, that are compatible with their own educational context, it is a really high possibility for these laggards to fail.

### **3. Method**

The related study utilized a descriptive research design. Descriptive research design aims to collect information about an existing phenomenon (Lambert & Lambert, 2012). Therefore, in this study, the issue of creating, implementing, and diffusing innovations in the field of ELT tried to be revealed with all clarity by rooting out the related literature. In addition, descriptive research design is known for its applicability and practicality because it brings a flexible perspective to the subject being researched and allows for more research when new situations arise.

In summary, in the current study, by using descriptive research design, the issue of creating, implementing, and diffusing innovations was to be explained to the stakeholders of the educational processes in full detail. Moreover, the effect of utilizing technologically enriched platforms for diffusing innovations is examined within the framework of descriptive research design. In addition, descriptive research tries to explain an existing situation as fully and carefully as possible (Büyüköztürk, Çakmak-Kılıç, Karadeniz, & Demirel, 2008). Therefore, all of the stages of the present study are shaped within the framework of methods required by the descriptive research design.

#### **4. Discussion**

Throughout the study, what innovation means, the characteristics of an innovation, and some procedures for innovation implementation have been stated, and in this part of the study what should be done in order to create more efficient language classroom innovations is discussed from the framework of teacher education, teacher empowerment, and new ways of innovation diffusion. To start with, it has been proposed that there is a dichotomy between research and practice (Kumaravadivelu, 2006). In other words, according to this dichotomy, language-teaching methodologies are prepared by the academicians, and it is the teachers' duty to implement them in their own lessons. From this point of view, teachers are considered apprentices and the academicians are their masters. In fact, the real situation in language classrooms is quite the opposite. As Freeman & Johnson (1998) explain teachers are not apprentices, they are agents, who will close the gap between theory and practice by creating their own language learning and teaching theories according to the constraints of their education contexts, so they are the real experts who need the most appreciation. Additionally, Hedgcock (2002) suggests that the related dichotomy is destructive because it leads novice teachers to accept language learning and teaching theories as prescriptive and authoritarian. It is the duty of teacher educators to make pre-service teachers aware of the language learning and teaching theories and equip them with a mindset of creating their own educational theory and practice according to the requirements of their own educational contexts (Jourdenais, 2009). Therefore, as Clarke (1994) suggests

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imposing a dichotomy between theory and practice is usually dysfunctional for teachers.

Another sad fact about teacher education is its inefficiency in providing the required knowledge and experience for creating innovative language learning practices for future teachers. Hedgcock (2002) also states that prospective teachers are usually underprepared to provide explanatory and descriptive knowledge that the students expect to gather from classroom practices. This problem leads teachers to become passive in taking action for their own language-teaching adventure. In fact, modern language teaching needs entrepreneurial teachers, who can take bold decisions and measurable risks, reflect on their own teaching and continuously improve themselves (Larsen-Freeman, 2004). In other words, in order to successfully create and diffuse innovations, teachers should adopt critical attitudes toward themselves and their personal beliefs about language teaching (Murphy, 2001). Additionally, if the dynamic nature of language teaching is considered, teacher education should primarily focus on establishing prospective teachers' autonomy and their problem-solving and decision-making abilities, as well as their ability to become reflective practitioners (Richard & Lockhart, 1994; Schön, 1983).

As it was mentioned before, there is a tendency to believe that there is a dichotomy between theory and practice, especially teachers. There are some reasons behind this, and Markee (1997) summarizes them as follows: Firstly, language papers are usually written by researchers, and they are offered to the use of other researchers, not primarily for classroom teachers. Secondly, the topics covered in research papers cannot be

directly suitable for language classrooms. Next, the hierarchy between teachers and researchers can lead to teachers' opinions being less noted. Classroom research, which is carried out by teachers, may not be considered sufficient by educational journals. Finally, maybe teachers do not want to conduct research and publish them. Apart from the reasons behind this problem, some useful solutions are present for tackling the dilemma, and these solutions are action research, classroom-based research, reflective teaching, and exploratory practice (Karagucuk, 2018). Richards (1998) and Markee (1997) claim that action research is the most possible means, can bring theory and practice together. Unfortunately, it is already too difficult to conduct action research for overburdened public school teachers. The best solution for truly profitable innovation creation and diffusion is the sharing of these new and innovative language-teaching experiences, ideas, activities, tasks, apps, and materials with the other colleagues, who are teaching in the same or similar educational context. Apart from making teachers utilize action research design in their own educational contexts, teachers should be equipped with observation skills, critical and creative thinking skills, conducting needs analysis skills, and effective communication skills in order to establish more innovation diffusion practices between different or similar educational contexts. All in all, as Fullan (1993) states teachers are central to long-lasting educational innovations, so providing proficient teacher education and appointing required skills for continuous professional development are the two sides of the same coin in the issue of innovation creation and diffusion for language learning and teaching.

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Another important issue is neglecting the contextuality in the innovation diffusion process, and this dilemma occurs especially the innovations are mandated by the educational authorities (top-down innovation diffusion) (Carless, 2003; Ellis, 1996; Li, 1998; Zhang, 2007). Unfortunately, almost in every educational context, it is possible to come across an innovation, which is mandated by the authorities. In fact, in the creation, implementation, and diffusion steps of these innovations, teachers' opinions about the innovation processes are generally neglected. As a result, as Van den Branden (2009) suggests, if innovations are mandated, teachers usually modify them until no innovation exists. In other words, it is better to implement innovations from the bottom-up innovation diffusion perspective (Markee, 1997). In the process of bottom-up innovation diffusion, teachers take the role of the creator of the innovation, and they implement and diffuse it to similar and larger educational contexts. Additionally, in the related process of innovation diffusion, as Dooley (1999) suggests, teachers should take gradual steps because, in this ambitious task, every effort matters and is valued. Teachers should also do their best to enhance innovative practices, and it is advised for them to strive for progress, not perfection because change requires time (Fullan, 1993). It is also advised to keep in mind that, as Van den Branden (2009) suggests, whether the innovations are mandated by authorities or developed by teachers, the innovations are created to cope with the problems that arise in language classrooms. Their main goal is always enhancing learner development, so it is advised for all innovation

practitioners to stay calm and do their best both for their learners' growth and for their professional development (Richards & Farrel, 2005).

Up to now, some other innovation diffusion procedures have been proposed by the researchers. For example, White (1988) claims that the research, development, and diffusion (RD&D) model can be utilized in the task of diffusing innovations. According to this model, some research is done in real classroom contexts, then they are developed for further improvement, and at the end, the product (the innovation) is diffused through journal papers. Philipson (1992) proposes a center-periphery (CP) model of innovation diffusion. In the essence of this model, the innovations are created for classroom consumption by the higher authorities. Noble (1995) also proposes a problem-solving (PS) approach for innovation diffusion, in which the stakeholders change their own perceptions of how to conduct and conceptualize teaching for the purpose of solving the educational problems in language teaching. Rondinelli, Middleton, & Verspoor (1990) also advise a contingent basis for innovation diffusion. The contingent basis model can be described as an eclectic approach to innovation diffusion, and it claims that all of the other models for language innovation diffusion (i.e. RD&D, CP, and PS) can be utilized for more efficient innovation diffusion practices. In fact, it is time to leave behind the differences between the innovation diffusion models and take action according to the efficiency of the innovation diffusion processes. Nowadays, more and more teachers are experimenting with their own innovations in their own classrooms, and at the same time, they handle the related process as group members. As Van den Branden (2009)



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suggests in the process of innovation creation and implementation, it is advised for teachers to discuss educational innovation in terms of their significant benefits for language learning and teaching. After that, teachers can prepare classroom-running procedures, which is compatible with the innovation that is being studied. Next, they can share their experiences in the classroom with each other in order to solve last-minute problems in the innovation implementation process. Last but not least, they can share promising results with fellow teachers from the same and larger educational domains.

The final issue to mention is the new ways for innovation diffusion. It is a known fact that information technology has changed our lives to a great extent, and it is promising to see some websites, forums, blogs, and social media groups from the Turkish educational context because these technological innovation diffusion platforms catalyze the over-burdening issue of innovation diffusion. For example, the “eighth grade English sharing” group on Facebook has more than thirty thousand English teacher members. In this platform, fellow colleagues share their innovative ideas, their materials, lesson plans, presentations, tests, and videos, which were primarily developed for the eighth-grade English curriculum. The utilization of technological tools seems the most effective way for innovation diffusion for similar contexts because, as Zhang (2007) suggests contextuality comes first in the innovation implementation process, and teachers should also share their experiences with each other for the purpose of creating and diffusing language innovations. In fact, there are some other examples of technologically

enriched platforms from the Turkish educational context. For example, the “Innovative Teachers of English” Facebook page is also a proficient one for primary school teachers. Eltarena.com is a forum page in which teachers from all K12 levels discuss and share their opinions for better language learning and teaching. Ingilizcecin.com is also a really good website that functions like Eltarena. Moreover, HI-Tech English (hitechenglish.weebly.com) has a special purpose for innovation diffusion. This website just focuses on the implementation of technological tools for primary-level English education. In fact, there are also many examples that we can find on the web, but we personally wanted to mention those specific platforms because they were founded by actual English teachers for the purpose of sharing and diffusing their locally grown innovative ideas. Moreover, we actively utilized them in our own English lessons for enhancing our professional development and for increasing the English language achievement of our beloved students, when we were still teachers. From their impact on Turkish educational contexts, it can be seen that the best way to create, implement, and diffuse innovations is the utilization of these and many other web-based platforms because they not only give examples of innovations but also shed light on the dark roads of actual innovation implementation. In fact, every lesson is an opportunity for action research and continuous improvement, so the main stage belongs to the teachers on the innovation issue (Karagucuk, 2018). Therefore, it is advised for educational authorities and academics to just have a look at these platforms, in order to see what teachers feel in language classrooms, how they solve language learning problems, and

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how they formulate their own innovations for their own educational contexts. If these platforms are investigated closely, the gap between the educational authorities and the teachers can be easily closed. As a result, a more fruitful language innovation creation, implementation, and diffusion can be formed for the future (Medgyes, 2017).

## **5. Conclusion**

The language learning and teaching methodologies, the integration of technology, and learner growth are always considered innovations up to now. In fact, the real innovative practices come from the classroom contexts, where the teachers formulate their innovations for better language learning and professional development. Therefore, academicians should have a look at what is happening in natural classroom contexts and what the teachers are doing with these fruitful innovations to close the gap between the academy and the kitchen (the classrooms). Moreover, the teachers should be recognized for the future development of the field and the real language innovation diffusion by educational authorities. In fact, some teachers are more competent in creating innovations, that are compatible with their learners, colleagues, and societies, so rather than importing and adopting innovations from the Western ESL countries; it is time to diffuse locally grown innovations through technological platforms. By doing this, the creation, implementation, and diffusion processes of the innovations can gain a more valid ground gradually.

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