Saudi EFL Teachers' Perceptions of Professional Development Activities

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Abstract

This study explored how often Saudi EFL teachers engage in professional development (PD) activities and how useful these activities were to them for their teaching practices. A random sample of seventy-seven English language teachers in Riyadh, the capital of Saudi Arabia, was selected. Questionnaires were used as a data collection tool. The results showed that discussing lessons with supervisors and sharing ideas informally with colleagues about teaching were the PD activities these teachers do most often. Traveling to other countries for professional development purposes and attending international conferences were the least frequent PD activities that teachers engage in. The most useful PD activities indicated by the teachers were discussing lessons with supervisors and observing other teachers' lessons (peer observation). The study revealed, also, that two-thirds of the teachers were not satisfied with the PD activities they do at school. The teachers held a range of views about what PD is. The most common view, though, referred to activities which develop teachers' teaching skills. Teachers should view teaching as a professional continuum where professional development is a lifelong learning endeavor

Introduction

Day defines professional development (PD) as "the process by which, alone and with others, teachers review, renew and extend their commitment as change agents to moral purpose of teaching: and by which they acquire and develop critically the knowledge, skills and emotional intelligence essential to good professional thinking, planning and practice with children, young people and colleagues through each phase of their teaching lives" (1999:04). As this definition suggests, PD is concerned with much more than the development of teaching skills. Effective PD will also impact teachers' attitudes and can additionally contribute to changes in philosophy of a school (Adelman, 1998; Crockett, 2002; Meng, Tajaroensuk, & Seepho, 2013). Professional development entails a relation of commitment between the teacher and the community that he serves as it involves a continuous process in which the teacher participates to extend his personal, and professional strength; and it involves the enhancement of the teacher's beliefs, abilities, and awareness with regard to his teaching practices (Abad, 2013).Dross (1999) identifies some critical issues for an effective professional development process (PDP):

- All teachers should participate in setting, apply, and assess the PDP;
- A professional environment should be created;
- PD should apply the results of educational research in the school field;
- Technology is to be used to facilitate the PD activities;
- PD should be viewed as a process, not as a product;
- A planned time should be set for PD activities

Meng and Tajaroensuk (2013) argue that the nature of EFL teachers' knowledge or professional knowledge appears to be one type of transient knowledge, which requires continuous update. They believe thatthe best way to bridge the gap between what teachers do need to update and what they have already had in terms of professional knowledge should be the use of the professional development.

Education stakeholders agree that efficient professional development represents an essential instrument for enhancing classroom practices (Lustick, 2011).McGee, Polly, and Wang (2013) state that in order to efficiently sustain teachers' execution of curricula, professional development should be offered that meets teachers' needs. The enhancement of the EFL teachers' proficiency level is influenced by their professional development, particularly their in-service professional development (Meng & Tajaroensuk, 2013).

Professional Development Models

One common model of professional development is the *traditional one* which is originally based on the assumption that teachers are supposed to have a shortage in knowledge and/or skills. However, traditional forms of professional development are criticized by the fact that they permit a passive role of teachers when learning from experts. This approach of professional development is seen as an ineffective in enhancing teaching quality (Garet, Porter, Desimone, Birman, & Yoon, 2001).

As classified by Hawley and Valli (1999), the traditional professional development has four models. The teachers can work alone while conducting self-assessments and building proper curriculum in the *Individually Guided Model*. The *Observer/Assessment Model* stresses the responsibility of a school master or a colleague teacher to observe teachers and offer enhancing feedback. In the *Development/Improvement Model*, teachers participate actively in whole-school reform activities. To end with the *Training Model, which* intends to develop instruction by encouraging teachers to participate in university coursework, in-service workshops, and conferences participation?

Meng, Tajaroensuk, and Seepho(2013) state that many previous studies conclude that traditional in-service PDmodels are presented in the form of workshops, seminars, conferences, or courses that have the characteristics of being not intensive nor coherent and with many fragments. Besides, those models are decontextualized and unrelated toreal classroom circumstances. Similarly, Lustick (2011) argues that teacher professional development in these models has not been considered very efficient for the inactive role played by teachers and being the recipients of knowledge and skills provided by outside authority such as visiting supervisor. A further criticism of these traditional models is the fact that these models are not based on identified standards or objectives for the educators, and they offer petite space to evaluate the accountability of the outcomes. Kennedy (2001) highlights another concern regarding the effectiveness of the traditional models as either 'out of date or insufficient to meet the new demands of the recent teaching and learning approaches. However, these traditional models of professional development are an obvious feature of some professional development programsin the current era (Sabah, Fayez, Alshamrani, & Mansour 2014).

As a reaction to the previously discussed concerns, *the reform model* was introduced as an alternative professional development model. Hawley and Valli (1999) illustrate their reform model by identifying seven principles:(1) Professional development model should be driven by clearly set objectives and learners' achievement;(2) teachers should be involved in the design and execution stages;(3) the model should be connected to school circumstances;(4) it should be based around collaborative problem solving;(5)the model should be unremitting and there should a type of follow-up and support;(6) the model should be enriching with various sources of teacher knowledge and experience;(7) it should offer more chances to the teachers to help them enhance their theoretical understanding of the subject taught. In addition, Desimone, Smith, and Phillips (2007) state that the professional development reform model views the teacher as an active learner and the learning process is embedded in the teaching practice. Lustick (2011) adds that the reform model stresses the role of reflection as a critical component to productive teacher learning. As the third version of professional development, Ingvarson (1998), Guskey (2003), and Lustick (2011) suggest the mixture of the traditional model and the reform model. Guskey (2003) argues that both models are significant for teacher professional development. They should be implemented together, stating that it is not reasonable to suppose that single list ofprofessional development guidelines will produce broad efficient activities. Mixing both features of the two models may lead to better professional development model, after taking the individual context and characteristics into consideration.

Previous Studies in the Professional Development

There is no doubt that offering teachers' professional development is significant, but investigating the usefulness of the professional development offers a clearer view of the efficiency of the model in achieving the set goals, as well as its effect on students' learning. Doran (2014) states that there is an increasing need to explore the professional learning experiences that equip teachers to offer appropriate teaching.

Ortaçtepe and Akyel (2015) conducted a study to explore the effect of an in-service teacher professional development program on teachers' efficacy and self-reported and actual practices. The study implemented a survey method with fifty Turkish EFL teachers working in eight schools, with twenty of them being observed as well. The results showed that the professional program had an enhancement on the participating in-service teachers as they were able to improve their language teaching practices and being more efficacious. These findings of the study assert the significance of raising the awareness about the value of the professional development programs. Regarding the efficiency of professional development programs, Vagner Matias (2015) argue that teachers who joined the teacher development programs showed an obvious change in their construct of beliefs about their pedagogical practices. The focus of this professional development programs was in enhancing the way grammar is taught in English language classes and increasing the public school English language teachers' abilities and skills to teach grammar.

Guskey (2000) outlines five levels for assessing the impact of the professional development and specifying the perceptions of the participants as the first level of them. If participants don't view the professional development content useful, they are not likely to adapt their teaching performance accordingly (Polly & Hannafin, 2011). McGee, et al., (2013) adopt Guskey's framework as a tool to explore participants' perceptions of the influence of the professional development that they had; and how components of the PD interpreted into their instruction. Twenty-two teachers were interviewed and observed during their teaching performance, making use of a comparison method, to gather valuable data for the study's purposes. The results concluded that teachers hold positive feeling towards the professional development. Teachers were positive about their own experiences. However, Teachers consistently expressed the need for someone to observe and evaluate their teaching.

In a qualitative study, Doran (2014) investigated perceptions of a group of teachers participated in a professional development (PD) program dedicated to the needs of the students who have diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds. Ten teachers at an intermediate school in the United States were interviewed regarding their prior professional development practices and content that they perceived to be the most significant for them. The research concluded that the participating teachers appreciate the professional development which covers content, teaching strategies, and interactions with learners, and they stated positive feelings towards informal PD, peer learning experiences as well as more formal professional development.

To address the importance of allowing the target teachers to participate in the design of the professional development program, Yumru (2015) conducted a study to explore EFL teachers' preferences for teacher learning activities in a professional development course in Turkey. As the Turkish Ministry of National Education (MEB) built a new English language teaching programs for the K-12 education, teachers were in need for a professional development program to help them cope with these changes. The study was conducted to investigate the teachers' expectations of the professional development programs by identifying their perceptions of the most significant teacher learning activities that contribute to their teaching practices. The study showed that the teachers highly rate practical and experiential activities that support them to acquire the required skills of observing and assessing their classroom teaching practices. The participating teachers also state that professional development program should address their needs, establish a culture of empowerment at schools; and build local teachers' community.

With some similarity to the current study, Alibakhshi and Dehvari (2015) investigated how Iranian EFL teachers perceive the continuing professional development, and explored their core professional development activities. This study made use of a phenomenological research design with twenty English language teachers being interviewed. The researchers found that EFL teachers perceived continuing professional development to involve the enhancement of skills, continuity of learning, updating of knowledge and skills. Regarding the methods of conducting professional development, teachers stated that they do so through working, formal education, and attending and presenting at CPF conferences and workshops.

In a qualitative case study with Japanese teachers, Yoshimoto Asaoka (2015) explored EFL student teachers' perspectives and experiences of their professional development. The study concluded that the procedure of EFL student teachers' professional development is not candid since every meditational activity the instructors employ is not adequate. The study suggested that teachers should work more closely with the supervisors in order to help those teachers enhance their experiences.

Previous studies in Saudi Context

In Saudi context, Sabahet al. (2014) conducted a study to explore the perspectives of Science and Mathematics Continuing Professional Development (CPD) providers concerning the nature and status of CPD provision in Saudi Arabia. The researchers implemented an open-ended questionnaire with twenty Science and Mathematics CPD providers to achieve the objectives of their study. Afteran inductive thematic analysis, the study concluded three themes: CPD planning and delivery, evaluating the influence of PD, and views of the efficient CPD. The study found that the traditional model is the central professional development model in Saudi Arabia. The study proposes incorporating other forms professional development in Saudi Arabia to allow more opportunities for successful professional development.

In a qualitative study, Alharbi (2011) explored the perceptions of the professional development program designers, as well as the newly qualified teachers. Five teachers were observed and interviewed in this study. Similar to the study of Sabah et al., the researcher used a constant comparison process. Results showed that participating teachers appreciated opportunities to debate continuous professional development provision. They also expressed positive views about the content, activities and the method of the program delivery, specificallythe open discussion.

In a mixed method study to explore the perceptions of the female EFL teachers about employing the reflective teaching as one tool of professional development in the Saudi context, Shukri (2014)also explored the challenges of PD in higher education. The researcher made use of a structured questionnaire as a quantitative methodology followed by qualitative analysis of the findings. The study concluded that the sample's views showed a robust relationship between reflective teaching and providing professional teaching. The participants believe that it is beneficial to attend workshops and do empirical research studies in classrooms in order to keep themselves updated.

In the same vein and with EFL teachers Tawalbeh (2015) investigated the teachers' perceptions about the effectiveness of the professional development programs at Taif University English Language Center in Saudi Arabia. A questionnaire of 4- Likert Scale and open-ended questions were used to gather data from seventy-six teachers. The findings showed that the teachers hold negative attitudes towards the existing professional development programs at the English Language Center. The researcher argues that the possible reasons for these negative attitudes are that their actual needs were not addressed when designing the program; they were widely inactive participants in the professional development program, and the trainers were not qualified enough to address specific areas. Besides, there was not an adequate emphasis on practice where teachers could seek answers to problems related to their classroom circumstances.

Reviewing the previous literature concerning teacher professional development in Saudi context revealed that there is little published research conducted in this field. Shukri (2014) argues that the topic of professional development is still under research in Saudi Arabia. There is no study, as far as the researcher knows, conducted to investigate the perceptions of Saudi EFL teachers regarding professional development activities and the frequency they participate in those activities.

Methodology

This study employed a survey descriptive analysis research design. A descriptive research design such as this can provide useful information about the distribution of a wide range of characteristics and of relationships between such characteristics. According to Cohen, Manion, and Morison (2007), "surveys are useful for gathering factual information, data on attitudes and preferences, beliefs and predictions, behaviors and experiences…the attractions of a survey lie in its appeal to generalizability or universality within given parameter" (p. 207).

Research Questions

This study explores how often Saudi EFL teachers engage in professional development (PD) activities and how useful these activities were to them for their teaching practices. The specific questions for the study were:

1. How often do Saudi English teachers say they engage in particular professional development activities?
2. Which professional development activities do Saudi English teachers say they find useful for their teaching?

Participants and Setting

The study took place during the second semester of the 2015-2016 school year. A random sample of public male schools in Riyadh, the capital of Saudi Arabia, was selected. One hundred questionnaires were distributed to all English teachers in those schools. Seventy-seven were returned with a response rate of 77%.

Data Collection

This study used a questionnaire as this was considered an appropriate way of examining the views of a larger group of respondents. The questionnaire was developed as follows.

1. Literature related to the research questions was read and analyzed (e.g. Kwakman, 2003; Craig, 2003; Borko, Elliott & Uchiyama, 2002).
2. The first draft of the questionnaire was developed using ideas from the previous literature and the researcher′s own experience with Saudi English teachers' PD. At this stage, a relevant methodological literature on questionnaire design was consulted (Bell, 1999).
3. The questionnaire was given to 10 English supervisors to review and comment on.
4. It was piloted with 10 teachers in the first semester of 2015/2016 school year. The pilot sample was not included in the main sample of the study.
5. It was further revised as a longer list of PD activities was included for teachers to comment on.
6. The final version was distributed to the main sample in the second semester of the 2015/16 school year.

The final version of the questionnaire consisted of two parts. In the first part, the participants were asked about their school and experience. In the second part, they were first given twenty professional development activities and they were asked to say how often do they practice them. Four possible answers were provided: often, sometimes, rarely, and never. In the second part of the questionnaire, teachers were given four open-ended questions to answer.

Data Analysis

The questionnaires were collected and numbered. The data were then coded using theStatistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS). Mean scores and frequencies were calculated for the quantitative responses. The open-ended questions' responses were analyzed thematically.

Results and Discussion

Teachers' Engagement in the PD activities

The below table lists the twenty professional development activities included in the questionnaire. Teachers were asked to say how often they do each, and here the activities are listed in descending order according to the mean score of each. The mean score is the overall average for each activity; based on a score of (1) for never, (2) for rarely, (3) for sometimes and (4) for often.

Table 1: Teachers' reported engagement in PD activities

Activity	Mean
Discussing lessons with the supervisor after class visits (post-lesson discussion)	3.77
Sharing ideas informally with colleagues about teaching	3.50
Participating in workshops or seminars	3.22
Reading professional materials (e.g. ELT magazines, TESOL journals)	3.16
Developing a teaching portfolio	3.15
Conducting workshops or seminars	3.11
Attending formal meetings with local supervisors	3.07
Asking for students' feedback	3.04
Participating in language training courses	2.97
Observing other teachers' lessons (peer observation)	2.79
Using the internet for getting teaching materials	2.63
Observing model lessons	2.61
Attending local educational events (e.g. forums, conferences)	2.54
Preparing lessons jointly with colleagues	2.49
Visiting other schools for professional development purposes	2.40
Participating in team teaching	2.33
Doing research	2.04
Participating in syllabus design	1.90
Attending international conferences	1.85
Traveling to other countries for professional development purposes	1.52

As could be seen in the above table (1), discussing lessons with the supervisor after class visits (post-lesson discussion) and sharing ideas informally with colleagues about teaching are the two PD activities these teachers said they do most often. It should be noted that these first PD activities are required by the Ministry of Education as a part of the supervising roles which in turn justifies being the most frequent activities. The participation in workshops or seminars came in the third top place as the Ministry of Education plan several workshops for teachers throughout the year. Consistently, Sukri (2014) indicates that the participating Saudi teachers believe that it is advantageous to participate in such workshops. Similarly, Alibakhshi and Dehvari (2015) reported that EFL teachers conduct professional development, through attending workshops. Notably, the most frequent activities are components of the traditional model of professional development, which in turn may be consistent with the findings of the study of Sabah, et al. (2014) that found the traditional model is the dominant employed professional development one in Saudi Arabia. In terms of the least frequent activities, those with a mean below 2 (indicating they were done between rarely and never) were: participating in syllabus design; attending international conferences; traveling to other countries for professional development purposes.

Teachers were also given the opportunity to mention any PD activities that are not on the above list but which they engaged in. These two items were reported: online courses, and reflection on the lessons. In fact, "reflection" is seen as an activity of the professional development reform model. This may indicate that professional development programs in Saudi Arabia incorporate mixed activities of the traditional and reform models in a limited manner (Guskey, 2003; Lustick, 2011).

Most Useful PD Activities

From those professional development activities, which teachers stated they practice often or sometimes they were asked to nominate the three that they found most useful for their teaching, Table (2) presents the findings for this question.

Table 2: The most useful PD activities

Professional Development Activity	N
Discussing lessons with the supervisor after class visits (post-lesson discussion)	27
Participating in workshops or seminars	24
Reading professional materials (e.g. ELT magazines, TESOL journals)	17
Sharing ideas informally with colleagues about teaching	16
Observing other teachers' lessons (peer observation)	14
Developing a teaching portfolio	7
Attending local educational events (e.g. forums, conferences)	7
Using the internet for getting teaching materials	6
Attending formal meetings with local supervisors	5
Participating in language training courses	5
Visiting other schools for professional development purposes	5
Doing research	4
Traveling to other countries for professional development purposes	2
Participating in team teaching	1
Participating in syllabus design	1

The above table shows that discussing lessons with supervisors after a class visit was considered to be the most useful activity by twenty-seven respondents of the sample. Besides, twenty-four teachers out of seventy-seven considered participating in workshops or seminars a useful professional development activity too.It could be seen that participants' views of the most effective activities reflect what they frequently experience. On the other hand, the "participation in team teaching and syllabus design" were viewed as the least useful activities.

It could be suggested that if teachers are given more opportunities to participate in syllabus design and team teaching, they may implement more positive views towards these activities. These least valued activities are considered among the reform model activities which require teachers to play more active roles in a learning process. Several studies suggested that these activities are very efficient in improving teachers' instructional practices (DeSimone, Smith, and Phillips, 2007; Lustick, 2011). Consequently, this study shows that teachers need to be offered more opportunities to experience this type of activities in order to help them build more positive perceptions towards it.

Defining Professional Development

In one of the open-ended questions, the sample was asked to explain what professional development meant to them. Their responses are summarized in the following table.

Table 3: The meanings of 'professional development'

Views about the meaning of professional development	N
Ways and programs to develop teachers' methods, skills, strategies, and ways of teaching	31
To keep up to date on your subject	7
To develop myself	5
Improving my English language skills	4
Each teacher should develop himself by doing research	3
Being better than yesterday	2
Courses and conferences which expand my knowledge	1
Expanding your knowledge and abilities in your career	1
To be a good teacher in the future	1
Developing new techniques in teaching	1
Ongoing improvement of my teaching	1
Using different activities in classroom	1
Getting better degrees and diplomas	1

Clearly, teachers hold a range of views about what PD is. The most common category, though, referred to activities that develop teachers' teaching skills. This understanding of professional development is, unfortunately, very narrow that ignores the role of professional development towards teachers' attitudes (Adelman, 1998; Crockett, 2002; Meng, Tajaroensuk, & Seepho, 2013). According to Glatthorn, Boschee, Whitehead, and Boschee (2012), many of teachers' practices are driven by their attitudes towards classroom practices. There should be an inclusive role for the teacher professional development programs to cover the various aspects of the teaching process. This could be achieved only if teachers have developed a wider perspective about what is meant by teacher professional development.

Satisfaction with Professional Development

The final question asked teachers about how satisfied they are with the PD activities they do at their schools. Sixty-seven percent of the teachers stated they are not satisfied with the current professional development activities. This finding is in a consistent line with the study of Torff, Sessions, and Byrnes (2005) which concluded that teachers stated negative perceptions of professional development. The passive role of the teachers in the professional development programs may create negative views. Teachers repeatedly report that their professional development activities integrate little active learning (Klingner, 2004). However, these findings were not consistent with the study of Sabah et al. (2014) that concluded positive perceptions towards the professional development programs. This inconsistency could be explained as the study of Sabah et al. (2014) explored the perceptions of only five teachers. A broader study may provide a clearer view regarding this aspect. Table (5) lists the reasons given by those who explained why they were not satisfied.

Table4: List of reasons given by teachers for being not satisfied with current PD

Reasons	N
I am not keeping up to date on teaching techniques	9
We do not have time allocated for PDs	7
Workshops and in-service training are needed	5
More modern teaching methods are needed	2
Not enough activities for PD	2
No opportunities to attend international conferences and courses	1

The most frequent reason stated is that teachers do not feel the current professional development activities can help them stay updated with the modern techniques. In fact, the participating sample has reported that the majority of professional activities tend to be within the traditional model with a passive role of the teachers. In the same vein, teachers suggest that they do need more modern teaching methods. One obvious obstacle faced by teachers is the limited time available for them.

Busy schedules and heavy loads of classes leave only very limited time for teachers to join further professional development activities. Moreover, other frequent stated reasons for this dissatisfaction is the lack of the opportunities to attend conferences and special courses, as well as the shortage of professional activities available for them.

Conclusion

The current survey study was conducted to investigate how often Saudi English teachers engage in particular professional development activities and which professional development activities they find useful for their teaching practices. The results showed that discussing lessons with the supervisor and sharing ideas informally with colleagues about teaching were rated as the most frequent professional development activities. Traveling to other countries for professional development purposes and attending international conferences were rated as the least frequent PD activities that teachers engage in. The most useful PD activities as viewed by the teachers were discussing lessons with supervisor and observing other teachers' lessons (peer observation). The study revealed, also, that two third of the teachers were not satisfied with the PD activities they do at school. The teachers held a range of views about what PD is. The most common view, though, referred to activities which develop teachers' teaching skills.

Findings of the current survey study may suggest that education leaders could be advised to reevaluate the current in-service professional development programs. It could be suggested to incorporate more teacher-centered activities that encourage teachers to play more active roles in their professional development. A more comprehensive plan of professional development program should be built with more varied activities that allow more active participation from the teachers' side. Those activities should be planned within the teachers' load to help them allocate adequate time for participation. More in-depth studies are suggested to evaluate the efficiency of the current professional development programs using various levels of evaluation. This study was limited to only a male sample of teachers. The views of female teachers should be considered as well to gain a deeper understanding of the perceptions of teachers regarding the professional development activities in Saudi Arabia.

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