

Professional Development Patterns of Saudi, Chinese, and Korean EFL Teachers: A Comparative Review and Call for International Collaboration

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Abstract

The paper compares the professional development of EFL teachers in Saudi Arabia, Korea, and China. It urges collaboration between Saudi, Chinese, and Korean educators to create joint programs that address shared challenges in EFL teaching, influenced by cultural and educational contexts. By identifying common patterns, the study highlights best practices and areas for improvement. The importance of collaboration, knowledge sharing, and ongoing support is emphasized to enhance teacher development and English language education in these countries. The conclusion stresses understanding teacher needs, improving proficiency, and fostering reflection for better teaching outcomes.

Keywords: EFL professional development, teacher training, comparative education, international collaboration

1. Introduction

It is crucial to compare Saudi EFL professional development with that of Korea and China, as these countries share similar cultural and educational contexts that influence how EFL teachers are trained and teach (Chen et al., 2023; Lim, 2021; Hakim, 2020; Alharbi, 2020; Almuhammadi, 2020; Liu & Zhang, 2014). The paper encourages Saudi educators to collaborate with their Korean and Chinese colleagues, as identifying commonalities in EFL professional development can reveal best practices and areas for improvement. This collaboration can lead to more effective teacher training programs and enhance English language education in these countries.

Exploring the common challenges faced by EFL teachers in these countries not only helps clarify their shared context but also encourages the exchange of knowledge and teaching experiences. This collaborative approach can lead to a deeper understanding of the cultural and educational factors that shape language teaching practices. By sharing best practices, teachers can learn effective strategies from their peers and adapt these methods to suit the specific needs of their students. Moreover, this exchange fosters innovation, as teachers can modify and refine techniques that have proven successful in other contexts, creating more dynamic and responsive classroom environments. Over time, such collaboration can enhance the overall quality of English language education by addressing gaps in teacher training, curriculum design, and student engagement. Ultimately, this process benefits both educators and learners, creating a more inclusive and adaptive framework for English language teaching.

This paper calls upon the Saudi teacher educator community to collaborate with their Korean and Chinese colleagues by actively engaging in knowledge exchange and joint initiatives aimed at addressing shared EFL challenges. By identifying the professional development challenges and solutions used in Korea and China, Saudi educators can adopt successful strategies that align with their own educational context. For example, they could collaborate on curriculum design, focusing on integrating cultural elements and improving language proficiency among both teachers and students.

Joint workshops, conferences, and online platforms could facilitate this collaboration, enabling educators to share their challenges, best practices and discuss innovative teaching methods attempted such as technology-enhanced

language learning or community-based language programs. Furthermore, joint research initiatives could allow educators to compare outcomes and assess the effectiveness of different approaches in improving student engagement and language acquisition. This ongoing exchange would not only benefit Saudi EFL teachers by expanding their instructional toolkit but also contribute to building a more robust, culturally sensitive approach to English teaching across these countries.

Therefore, in this paper, it is imperative to discuss and compare EFL professional development in Saudi Arabia, Korea, and China to urge creating unified collaborative programs which address all EFL teachers across these countries to receive the necessary training and provide students with a high-quality English language education. This can lead to a more well-rounded support and effective teaching experience for both teachers and students and contribute to the overall growth and development of the field of English language teaching.

2. Saudi and Chinese EFL Teachers: Need for Collaborative Learning

In this section, I highlight the common challenges faced by EFL teachers in Saudi Arabia and China and propose joint solutions to address them.

In China, Hu's study (2005) reviewed the needs and problems of Chinese EFL teachers and suggested improvements for their professional development. Hu (2005) stated that professional development programs should be re-conceptualized to encompass the complexity of teaching, multiple factors in teachers' work, context-dependent nature of professional knowledge, and practical experience. Such programs should provide teachers with knowledge of subject matter and pedagogy, and awareness of social, political, and school impacts on teachers and their students.

Hu (2005) found that EFL professional development in China lacks collaborative practices and called for critical collegiality to enable teachers to form a critical relationship by asking each other more questions, enabling a deeper understanding and analysis of their beliefs and practices, and of potential alternative teaching perspectives. However, Hu (2005) believed that her EFL teacher community would not talk about and critique each other openly due to cultural factors. Nevertheless, she recommended adopting the idea of critical collegiality for better professional development.

Hu (2005) highlighted the absence of collaborative practices in EFL professional development in China and advocated for critical collegiality as a means to foster deeper professional dialogue. Despite acknowledging cultural barriers that might inhibit open critique among teachers, Hu still saw value in this approach for enhancing professional growth. Expanding on this concept, Liu and Zhang (2014) later investigated the role of reflective teaching in EFL professional development, finding that it effectively promotes self-awareness and critical reflection on teaching beliefs and practices. They found that this approach helped teachers to become more aware of their teaching practices and to reflect on their own beliefs and values. Furthermore, in terms of critical collegiality, Wang et al. (2023) examined the effectiveness of peer feedback as a form of professional development for EFL teachers. They found that peer feedback encouraged self-reflection and collaboration among teachers, leading to improvements in their teaching practices and student outcomes.

And in terms of using technology, Chen et al. (2023) investigated the effectiveness of online professional development programs for EFL teachers in China. They found that these programs were effective in improving teachers' knowledge and skills, as well as their confidence and motivation in teaching. However, their findings revealed that teachers tended to favor surface-level participation behaviors, such as sharing resources and experiences, while rarely engaging in deeper activities like proposing knowledge topics or developing teaching and research practices. Additionally, teachers with higher participation frequency often exhibited lower-quality participation, frequently repeating these shallow participation behaviors. The study recommended strategies to better support teachers' engagement in online professional development by strengthening the connections between information sharing, knowledge-building activities, and teaching and research practices.

Similarly, Saudi EFL teachers experience fewer opportunities for collaboration, peer feedback, using online training due to some institutional barriers, plus the teacher education program does not prepare them with more tools for continuous learning and active engagement and does not address their beliefs and needs (Hakim, 2020; Alharbi, 2020; Almuhammadi, 2020). They may, however, critique each other's ideas and practices, but need a clear and systematic way to engage in this critical conversation and reflection. Limited access to collaboration, peer observation, and online training opportunities are seen clearly by other Saudi EFL experts. Alshaikhi (2020) found that collaboration among EFL teachers in Saudi Arabia was limited due to a lack of time, resources, and support from school administrators. Similarly, Alzahrani & Althaqafi (2020) studied online professional development programs for Saudi EFL teachers and revealed the absence of considering teachers' needs, preferences, and challenges and providing them with support to apply newly acquired knowledge within a long

period of time.

Saudi and Chinese EFL professional development programs share similar challenges related to collaboration, participation, and the integration of technology. In China, while online professional development has been successful in boosting teachers' knowledge, confidence, and motivation, it often leads to superficial engagement, with teachers primarily focusing on resource-sharing rather than engaging in deeper, reflective practices. In Saudi Arabia, EFL teachers also face limited opportunities for collaboration and online training. Both contexts underscore the need for more robust strategies to enhance meaningful participation, collaboration, and reflective practice in EFL professional development.

A proposed solution to address the shared challenges in Saudi and Chinese EFL professional development programs is to create a unified, interactive online platform that goes beyond mere resource sharing and fosters deeper engagement through collaborative, reflective practices. This platform could include features such as virtual workshops, peer mentoring, and discussion forums where teachers can share experiences, reflect on teaching practices, and collaborate on lesson plans or classroom strategies. To promote meaningful participation, the platform could integrate collaborative projects where teachers from both countries work together on case studies or problem-solving tasks, encouraging reflective dialogue. Additionally, incorporating technology-based tools like video-based peer observation and feedback systems can help teachers critically analyze their teaching methods and learn from each other's experiences. By providing structured opportunities for continuous professional development and fostering a culture of reflection and collaboration, this platform could significantly enhance the effectiveness of EFL training in both Saudi Arabia and China.

3. Saudi and Korean EFL Teachers: Moving Towards a Future that Considers Their Needs and Recognizes Their Beliefs

The Saudi EFL context shares several similarities with Korea, including common challenges such as the need to establish centers for in-service teacher learning, enhance teachers' linguistic skills, and promote deeper research collaboration among educators.

Koh (2002) and Choi (1998) proposed a new EFL professional development model in Korea based on their study of Korean EFL teachers' needs and problems. They suggested establishing independent inservice teacher learning communities or institutes with certain goals and educational and financial resources. These institutes are essential in both Korean and Saudi contexts as both EFL teachers have an increasing need for institutes that offer training courses, workshops, and supervision (Alzahrani, 2020). Establishing these institutes requires collaboration and support from the government, schools, universities, and teachers.

Also, Koh (2002) and Choi (1998), in their suggested model, touch on teachers' needs to improve their English language skills. Like Ihm (1998), they insisted that teachers have a good level of English proficiency, especially if they planned to engage in more continuous learning. These teachers have certain linguistic needs, even after graduating from their teacher education program. They should be given courses that support their language learning and create ample activities to enhance their language learning and use.

Similarly, Saudi EFL teachers urgently need these courses because they live in a community in which they never interact in English and never think about learning additional vocabulary and mastering their speaking and writing skills (Alzahrani, 2020). These courses should offer both Korean and Saudi teachers language learning opportunities involving extensive English use in oral and written activities.

In response to the real common challenges in both contexts, Lim's (2021) study was conducted with Korean EFL teachers who participated in a collaborative inquiry community. The community aimed to enhance the teachers' self-efficacy, instructional skills, and reflective practices through a series of workshops and online discussions. The teachers did work in reflective practices, conducted action research, and critically analyzed educational technologies, all of which strengthened their language teacher agency. The study highlights the importance of providing ongoing professional development opportunities for EFL teachers and incorporating reflective teaching strategies into training programs.

Likewise, in Saudi Arabia, a similar solution was taken by Alghamdi (2018) by creating a two-day Higher Order Thinking Skills (HOTS) workshop which was attended by 85 teachers. Participants were surveyed immediately after the workshop and subsequently interviewed three months later to evaluate the long-term impact. The results indicate that while 89% of faculty members were initially enthusiastic about implementing the skills and knowledge gained, this enthusiasm diminished over time. The decline was primarily due to a shift in focus back to routine tasks, such as lecturing, which led to a reduced application of HOTS principles in their teaching practices.

Both studies underscore the critical role of effectively implementing professional development in educational

settings. Lim's (2021) research on Korean EFL teachers and Alghamdi's (2018) study on a HOTS workshop in Saudi Arabia stress the importance of continuous, reflective professional development. In both cases, participants engaged in activities designed to enhance teaching practices—such as reflective exercises, action research, and the critical evaluation of educational technologies in the Korean study, and the application of HOTS in the Saudi context. However, despite initial enthusiasm and active participation, both studies revealed a similar challenge: over time, teachers' ability to apply newly acquired skills declined as they reverted to routine tasks. This highlights the need for ongoing support and the integration of reflective practices into professional development programs to sustain long-term impact.

In terms of having more collaboration and interactive openness with the teachers, Suh (1996) attempted to develop an effective EFL teacher training program based on an analysis of the qualities of past training programs and information on potential program aspects gathered via a questionnaire distributed to teachers. Findings indicated that extensive English interaction between the trainers and trainees was the most critical component. Teachers complained about being just listeners rather than participants—they wanted to share their ideas and beliefs and create strategies by which they could cope with their teaching problems.

In line with Suh's (1996) finding, Saudi EFL teachers should have an opportunity to offer their thoughts and perceptions on the content of potential training courses, including those emphasizing English conversation to enhance their speaking skills (Alzahrani, 2020). Interaction should be the norm in training courses, creating an engaging and exciting atmosphere for teachers.

Several studies in Korea have explored the role of technology in EFL professional development. Lim (2002) examined a web-based teacher training program to understand teachers' experiences and found that training courses should be tailored to teachers' specific needs to be more effective. A survey of teachers' needs and beliefs, as also emphasized by Suh (1996), was recommended to help teachers identify and enroll in appropriate programs. This approach is equally relevant in the Saudi EFL context, where educators highly value addressing teachers' professional development needs and improving their teaching effectiveness (Alzahrani, 2020; Alharbi, 2020; Almuhammadi, 2020). Understanding and responding to teachers' needs and beliefs should be a key priority for teacher educators to help create more relevant pedagogical approaches and teaching styles.

Additionally, Lee and Han (2000) examined EFL teachers' attitudes toward using technology in their professional development. They found that teachers recognize the importance of technology and enjoy teaching with it. However, they face some technology-related problems that might prevent them from using it. Teachers lack knowledge and experience with its proper use, in addition to lacking needed hardware and software provided by schools.

Teacher educators in both countries must be mindful of the real limitations within schools, as pointed out by Lee and Han (2000), which often prevent the effective integration of technology. While Saudi teachers are eager to incorporate technology into their teaching, their efforts are frequently hindered by the lack of essential resources like computer labs, reliable internet access, and appropriate software—resources that are typically absent in many Saudi schools (Alzahrani, 2020; Alharbi, 2020; Hakim, 2020; Farooq and Soomro, 2018). Without a supportive and well-equipped environment, teachers find it challenging to use technology for their professional development.

Farooq and Soomro (2018) further emphasized that although Saudi teachers are aware of the educational potential of technology, they often do not incorporate it during the planning and preparation stages of their lessons. Instead, they tend to use available technological tools in a limited way, primarily to facilitate specific classroom activities. Even though they are required to use their learning management system for uploading assignments and assessments, there is a general reluctance to design technology-based activities for English language learners. This indicates a pressing need for both teachers and students to receive further training to fully integrate technology into the educational process.

The challenges brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic have only magnified these existing issues. Hakim (2020) found that despite having access to various technological tools like Blackboard Ultra, podcasting, and vodcasting, Saudi teachers faced significant obstacles, such as inadequate access to modern equipment, unstable internet connections, and low student motivation and attention. Nevertheless, many teachers displayed a positive attitude towards using technology in online classes, showing a willingness to adapt despite the difficulties.

These studies collectively underscore the ongoing challenges Saudi and Korean teachers face in integrating technology into their teaching practices. Although there is a strong interest and willingness to use technology, systemic issues—such as resource shortages, insufficient training, and the added pressures of the COVID-19 pandemic—continue to be significant barriers. Overcoming these challenges will require a focused effort to provide the necessary resources, training, and support, enabling the full potential of technology in Saudi and

Korean education to be realized.

A solution to the challenges faced by Saudi and Korean teachers in integrating technology into their teaching practices requires a multifaceted approach that addresses resource availability, targeted training, and sustained support. Government-funded initiatives should prioritize the provision of adequate technological infrastructure, including reliable internet access, modern hardware, and specialized educational software. In addition, collaborative professional development programs funded by both countries must be designed to focus not only on the technical skills needed to operate these tools but also on pedagogical strategies for effectively incorporating technology into classroom instruction. Peer mentoring and collaborative learning models could facilitate knowledge sharing among educators, enabling more experienced teachers to guide their colleagues in the effective use of technological resources.

Furthermore, continuous professional development, through on-demand technical support and periodic joint workshops, would help teachers stay current with evolving tools and practices. By addressing these systemic issues together, both Saudi and Korean education systems can overcome barriers to technology integration, thereby enhancing instructional practices and adapting more effectively to challenges such as those posed by the COVID-19 pandemic.

4. Conclusion

The core purpose for comparing the EFL contexts of Saudi Arabia with China and Korea is to advocate for collaborative efforts among Saudi educators and their colleagues in these countries. By highlighting the similarities and challenges across these contexts, the paper underscores the benefits of pooling resources and strategies. It encourages Saudi educators to engage in joint initiatives such as shared professional development programs, online platforms, curriculum design, and research projects. This collaborative approach aims to streamline efforts, reduce redundancy, and leverage diverse expertise to address common EFL challenges more effectively.

The paper highlights several comparable issues between Saudi and Chinese EFL professional development programs, particularly regarding collaboration, participation, and technology integration. In China, although online training has improved teachers' knowledge, confidence, and motivation, it often results in superficial involvement with limited focus on deeper reflective practices. Similarly, Saudi EFL teachers face challenges such as limited collaboration opportunities and inadequate online training. Both contexts reveal the need for more effective strategies to foster meaningful participation, collaboration, and reflective practices in EFL professional development.

Additionally, the paper examines persistent challenges faced by Saudi and Korean EFL teachers when integrating technology into their teaching practices. Despite a strong interest in and willingness to use technology, systemic issues like resource shortages and insufficient training remain significant obstacles. Addressing these challenges requires a concerted effort to provide essential resources, comprehensive training, and ongoing support, thereby unlocking the full potential of technology in educational settings in both countries.

To address these challenges, the paper urges Saudi teacher educators to collaborate with their colleagues in Korea and China through active knowledge exchange and joint efforts. By examining the professional development challenges and solutions attempted in Korea and China, Saudi educators can adapt successful methods to their own context. Collaboration should be facilitated through joint workshops, conferences, and online platforms, allowing educators to discuss their challenges, share best practices, and explore innovative approaches such as technology-enhanced language learning or community-based programs. Collaborative research initiatives could further enable educators to evaluate the effectiveness of various strategies in boosting student engagement and language acquisition. This ongoing exchange would not only enrich the instructional practices of Saudi EFL teachers but also foster a more nuanced and culturally responsive approach to English language teaching across these nations.

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