

# EFL Teachers' Perceptions and Beliefs About a Professional Development Programme at an English Language Institute at a Saudi Arabian University

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## Abstract

This research study, based on qualitative research design, reports on the findings from native and non-native university English language teachers' perceptions and beliefs with regards to a professional development programme they attended in their teaching context where they work at an English language institute (ELI) that is part of a Saudi university. The sample consisted of five male English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers who were involved in teaching intensive EFL courses at a Preparatory Year Programme (PYP). In this study, semi-structured interviews were utilized as the data collection method. Analysis of the data revealed that all teachers had a wide understanding of some essential issues related to professional development. Most of these teachers supported adopting the obligation policy of teacher involvement in the professional development programme. On the other hand, several participants voiced few concerns towards the available activities that are marked by being irresponsible to their needs, inadequate for the teaching context and unhelpful for them to reflect on their teaching practice. Also, the data highlighted the absence of the teachers' role in the implemented professional development programme. The findings, however, indicated that the participants found the group discussion useful and enriching to their learning experiences. Furthermore, the data findings pinpointed that the teachers provided some useful suggestions for future improvement in the study context. Their suggestions tackled the trainer's competence, needs analysis and the involvement of teachers in setting the agenda of their professional development programs.

**Keywords:** EFL, professional development, qualitative research, Saudi Arabia

## 1. Introduction

Saudi universities have adopted a new educational policy in most tertiary departments; using English as the medium of instruction for all scientific departments in Saudi universities (ur Rahman & Alhaisoni, 2013). This has led to establishing a Preparatory Year Programme (PYP) in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) at the concerned English language institutes at these universities, including the site of this study. At such institutes, teachers need to be given effective opportunities of professional development (Avidov-Ungar, 2016). Therefore, a Professional Development Programme (PDP) for the teachers in a Saudi English language institute, where this study is conducted, has been organized. It was designed and presented by the publisher of *Interactions* English course books series used at the PYP, Pearson & Longman. The purpose of the PDP course was to discuss the content of the course books with teachers, their new teaching requirements and to guide teachers on how to teach the new course books competently, to meet the aims of the PYP. In particular, it seeks to improve students' linguistic competence. It was the first professional development course arranged for EFL teachers at the concerned institute. Organizing such courses confirms that PDP plays a vital role in reaching a successful educational reform. It can help teachers to start changes that prepare them for future challenges, guide them to get involved in their new active roles and help them learn some teaching strategies which could lead to improving students' achievement (Hopkins, 2015).

The aims of this small-scale exploratory study are fourfold: First, it aims at exploring the EFL teachers' beliefs about the professional development course that they attended at the site of the study. Second, it aims at investigating some aspects in that development course to identify the teachers' understanding of professional

development (PD) and the factors behind their uptake in the professional development course. In addition, it aims at discovering the teachers' experiences about the different issues related to the available activities in the programme and their role in that development course. Finally, it aims at exploring the participants' beliefs regarding the improvement of the areas under investigation.

## 2. Literature Review

There are four important elements of research which need to be explored as it relates to teachers' professional development. First, the teachers' perceptions and beliefs and how they relate to teachers' professional development. Second, the different definitions of professional development. Third, the approaches to professional development are explained. In addition, models of professional development are discussed. Finally, pinpointing the different features of effective professional development.

### 2.1 Teachers' Beliefs

In the literature, there is no consensus on the meaning of beliefs among researchers, but there is a common view that they are regarded as a mental state that can be consciously or unconsciously held (Borg, 2001). According to Shulman (1987), beliefs come from four sources: content knowledge, educational materials, formal teacher education, and practice. Teachers' beliefs are a crucial part in developing teachers' professional development. Therefore, it is hard to achieve the intended aims of teachers' professional development without understanding their views about PD and their assumed roles (El Nagdi, Leammukda, & Roehrig, 2018; Soslau, Gallo-Fox, & Scantlebury, 2018). This indicates that having a thorough investigation of teachers' beliefs about PD can probably improve the institutional policies and practices about teachers' professional development. To the best of the knowledge of the researcher, there are very few empirical studies that investigated the teachers' beliefs about professional development in Saudi Arabia. However, none have been conducted at the university level, especially at the English language institutes, in Saudi Arabian universities. As a result, it is difficult to refer to some relevant studies from the Saudi context to support the emerging findings of the current study.

### 2.2 Professional Development

Defining professional development is not an easy task because it depends on common cultural and socio-economic aspects (Leibowitz, Bozalek, van Schalkwyk, & Winberg, 2015). Therefore, there is no consensus in the literature on the definition of professional development which has led to many competing ones. For example, Kyndt, Gijbels, Grosemans and Donche (2016) contend that professional development is the formal and informal activities accomplished by either individuals or system to promote for staff growth and renewal. For Van Eekelen, Boshuizen and Vermunt (2005), it is a planned process designed for teacher post-initial education and training. Hughes' definition is more appealing because it shows the individual interests for professional development and it has more positive impacts on teachers' personal growth than the formal imposed type of PD on teachers. Therefore, educational institutions practice indirect pressure on teachers to engage them in development activities, in order to improve their academic standards (Kornbluh, Ozer, Allen, & Kirshner, 2015).

### 2.3 Approaches of Professional Development

In education, there are two contradictory stances in professional development: namely, the top-down and bottom-up approaches (López, 2008). The former is usually imposed by the system or institution which determines the designs, pedagogy and the structure of the development package (Mason et al., 2014). In the latter, the participants have a voice, and they are involved in planning, designing the development programme. They exert collaborative efforts and share the same responsibilities to reflect their views about professional development as an essential feature of their personal growth (Borko, 2004; Vangrieken, Meredith, Packer, & Kyndt, 2017). The bottom-up approach seems more productive and advantageous than the first one in educational institutions because it recognizes the teachers' legitimate roles in providing some sorts of useful inputs into their own professional development based on their previous knowledge and experiences (Spies, Lyons, Huerta, Garza, & Reding, 2017).

### 2.4 Models of Professional Development

In this section, some models of professional development are discussed. These models are the *Individual Model*, the *Institutional Model*, and the *Interactive Model*.

#### 2.4.1 The Individual Model

In this model, the individuals take the responsibilities for their personal development, through individuals planning, implementing and evaluating their development activities, on their own. Also, it can take some

different forms, like learning from class materials, reflecting on their teaching experience, designing new courses, evaluating curriculum and conducting research (Caffarella & Zinn, 1999).

#### 2.4.2 The Institutional Model

This model requires the teacher to develop their knowledge based on institutional needs. The interaction among teachers is essential, and they are expected to work in pairs or in groups. The development in this model is guided by participating in the development programmes in the institution. The professional activities can include meetings, workshops, seminars, and conferences. The institution usually determines the areas of focus or the development type in which teachers need to participate (Caffarella & Zinn, 1999; Cullingford, 2017).

#### 2.4.3 The Interactive Model

The interactive professional development model is not yet a common practice among many teachers. It is based on getting teachers to collaborate together to develop their own school or institution based on issues or school improvement plans. This model can be fulfilled through some forms such as professional reading, professional dialogues, and teachers' research. This method requires teachers to refine their roles and their working conditions (Guskey, 2002).

In relation to this, Starkey et al. (2009) conducted a quantitative study that evaluated the newly introduced professional development programme. The researchers investigated different elements, like the content of the development programme, the quality of its affiliation, teachers' input in the design of the programme and its effectiveness. The results revealed a wide involvement for the participants in setting their priorities for their own professional development activities. Other positive features were reported in most of the investigated areas: namely, the content was highly connected to the participants' needs and teaching contexts and the development programmes had positive impacts on the teachers' teaching practice.

#### 2.5 Features of Effective Professional Development

Some researchers have advocated some essential features that need to be represented in a professional development programme to consider it as an efficient one (Starkey et al., 2009). These characteristics address different aspects of professional development. For some researchers, the expertise of the teacher educators (trainers) is a vital aspect in PD. Therefore, they believe that they have to have some highly required skills such as organizational competence, communicative competencies and the contextual background knowledge of the context. Most importantly, teacher trainers have to be professional in addressing the teachers' learning needs (Britten, 1985; Day, 2002; Richards, 1998). Additionally, conducting a need analysis is vital, to identify the extent to which the participants' needs are met in the offered programme (Richards, Gallo, & Renandya, 2001). The extent to which the PD is relevant to the teachers' needs. Furthermore, the content of the PD has to be built on or take into consideration the existing knowledge, skills and experience of the in-service teachers in the intended PD context (Starkey et al., 2009).

### 3. Methodology

This is a small-scale exploratory study which adopts a qualitative research methodology design. It was helpful in exploring the teachers' beliefs about the professional development course attended. The qualitative design accepts the researchers' complete involvement during the study to gain a deep and broad understanding of the investigated issues (Bryman, 2015; Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2013; Creswell & Creswell, 2017).

#### 3.1 Research Questions

The study attempted to address the following research questions:

- 1) What do the teachers understand through professional development?
- 2) What factors influence teachers' uptake of professional development?
- 3) What are the teachers' views about professional development?
- 4) What suggestions do the teachers offer for future professional development?

#### 3.2 Participants

Sampling is an important step in any research. Therefore, selection of an appropriate sampling strategy is essential to all qualitative researchers (Cohen et al., 2013; Onwuegbuzie & Collins, 2007). Thus, the non-probability sampling is chosen with a special focus on purposive sampling (Bryman, 2008). This method involves choosing the sample by their characteristics to meet the specific purpose of the study (Cohen et al., 2013). These teachers were selected according to two criteria: purposiveness and accessibility (Etikan, Musa, & Alkassim, 2016). The participants were five native and non- native male English language teachers, working at

the English language institute in a Saudi university. All the teachers attended the first professional development course at the site of the study. These teachers come from different countries: South Africa, Jordan, Tunisia, Egypt, and America.

### *3.3 The Research Instrument*

In this study, semi-structured interviews were the only tool for carrying out the investigation. According to Opdenakker (2006), interviews are the most common data collection method used in qualitative research and they give a room for questioning and free interaction (Brooks, Bee, & Rogers, 2018). The interviews questions were designed to address the research questions. All the interviews questions were open-ended. These types of questions can offer explicit assertions, illustrative quotes, and can also lead to the identification of some issues not previously expected (Dörnyei, 2003).

### *3.4 Data Analysis*

The data analysis process was not an easy task to conduct, but it was more complicated, due to time and effort constraints. The data analysis in qualitative research depends on interpreting the obtained data subjectively (Cohen et al., 2013; Creswell & Creswell, 2017). All the interviews were done individually over the phone for logistical reasons. After conducting the interviews, they were transcribed and coded. The analysis of the data required putting the participants' responses in different tables that helped in the data organization. More specifically, the researcher read and reread the data several times to come up with categories and subcategories that were later summarised and classified in tables. The themes emerged from the data inductively. In other words, the researcher allowed ideas to develop from the obtained data (Saldaña, 2015).

## **4. Findings and Discussion**

This section presents the key findings of the current study. It also discusses the main factors behind these findings of the context of the present research and the relevant literature review and related studies. The interviewees' responses to the interview questions generated rich and in-depth data which was addressed and categorized under themes and sub-themes.

The first research question of the current study addresses the teachers' understanding of professional development. The major theme that emerged from the data was the teachers' full understanding of professional development.

### *4.1 Teachers' Wide Understanding of Professional Development*

As the data revealed, all the five interviewees were so enthusiastic to express their views about professional development which convey some notions and terms that belong to the central tenets of professional development. For example, they referred to the importance, role, and timing of a professional development programme. The following quotes demonstrate these ideas in sequence. There was a consensus among all interviewees regarding the importance of professional development as a vital aspect of their career as teachers. A sample example of this view is clearly stated by T3 in the following extract: "As an ambitious teacher, I see professional development as an integral part of my job. It is essentially essential for me, particularly to become a good language teacher". In practice, PD plays a significant role for teachers and had positive impacts on their teaching practice. With reference to this, T4 statement gives an example of such efficient role and its impacts on his personal experience as he said: "Professional development has been playing a central role since I took teaching as a career. I have been attending different kinds of P.D courses. Without them, I could have failed to be a teacher. They really informed and upgraded my existing knowledge".

With respect to the timing of PD, there was a consensus among all the participants that PD continues throughout a person's career life as it was stated by as T1 commented thus: "...it starts as soon as somebody starts teaching until he retires".

As the data revealed, the participants perceived that professional development from different perspectives. Yet, all of their expressed views showed clear evidence that they had a broad knowledge about some essential issues related to their professional development, at the same time they reflected some of the opinions reviewed in the literature. For example, all the interviewees agreed on the significance of professional development for teachers. This is in line with Clement and Vandenberghe (2000) assertion that there is a consensus on the importance of teachers' professional development. Moreover, their views about the duration of the professional development are supported by Castle's claim who asserted that professional development in education is a career-long process (Zepeda, 2013). In general, it is best to create wide-ranging perspectives about PD, not only in the context of the current study but also in some other EFL learning environments.

The second research question tackles the factors that influence teachers' uptake in the professional development course. The emerged theme from the data for this research question was participants' compulsory participation.

#### *4.2 Teachers' Mandatory Participation*

Analysis of the data revealed that the overall responses of the participants indicated that teachers' participation in the professional development course in their teaching context was obligatory. The following quote is an example of their comments as T3 explained: "There was not any element of voluntarily participation. There was no way out, it was compulsory for all teachers to go and set there whether they like it or not...".

However, the participants had two different perspectives towards adopting such policy. Three interviewees were in favour of the obligation practice. T5 comment is a sample example of which justified his view by tackling the purpose of the development course: "...Attendance of workshops and seminars should be compulsory for the teachers, especially when the institution spends some money on new course books and organizing development courses for them to help them deal with their contents. I believe there must be an obligation here". On the other hand, the other interviewees refused the notion of forcing teachers to take part in development course and had a sense of a negative attitude. With regards to this view, two accounts were given: T4 said: "it is not a good idea. It should be optional because if you oblige teachers to participate in development course, it will not be so fruitful and beneficial".

Data analysis showed that the institution made the attendance of the organized development course mandatory for all teachers. This scenario supports Clement and Vandenberghe's (2000) views that there is some pressure on teachers practiced by their institutions for professional development to meet their needs. As evident in the data most participants supported adopting the obligation policy which was taken by the administration of the institute. I believe it was a good decision for the following reasons. The institution introduced the new English course books, *Interactions* series and organized a development course which focused on discussing issues related to course books content and helping the teachers teach the new course books competently to achieve the aim of establishing the PYP in EFL in the English language institute. The situation here reflects Vähäsantanen (2015) argument that professional development aims to support essential educational changes and reforms that can have impacts on the teaching practice. Therefore, there was a need to involve all the teachers in the PDP because they are regarded as the main tools for implementing any new strategies at the institution. This could help teachers have an idea about the new teaching approaches or methods that they need to implement in their classes according to the new course books series design, give them the chance to raise any concerns about certain aspects in these course books if any, express their views regarding the usefulness of these course books for their teaching context, recommend any needed changes and to identify whether they can help in achieving the objectives of PYP or not. However, if the attendance was made optional for teachers as it was suggested by two participants, this could have possibly led to the absence of many of them. Consequently, this could result in some negative impacts on their own teaching context. For example, some teachers would be unaware of the new changes that they need to know and to implement in their teaching practice according to the new course books layout or requirements of the PYP. This can negatively affect the intended objectives of the PYP. This finding is similar to that of Mcnamee et al.'s (2004) mixed-method case study which indicated that participation in that programme was a compulsory for all the academic staff at the University of Gloucestershire, U.K.

The third research question deals with teachers' views about the professional development course that they attended in the English language institute. The emerged theme for this question is teachers' perception of the development course and group discussion.

#### *4.3 Teachers' Perception of the Professional Development Course*

Analysis of the data revealed that the overall responses of the participants indicated that they had a sense of negative attitude towards some aspects about the available activities that they had experienced. For example, they expressed their dissatisfaction regarding the absence of teachers' role, the available activities, and the lack of reflection. The following quotes demonstrate these ideas in sequence.

It was a surprise that all the participants' responses revealed that the teachers did not play any single role in planning or setting the agenda of the professional development course that they had to attend in their own teaching context. The following quote given by T4 is an example of their views: "We were not involved in the planning of professional development courses. We had no say on that at all". T5 tackled the level of the activities as he said: "... Most of the activities were quite ordinary and easy for us. Personally, I did not like that these easy activities I need some activities to challenge us".

Furthermore, T1 addressed the different aspect of the activities. This teacher who did not like including

unsuitable activities for the learning context, commented thus: “Most of the activities used by the trainer as examples were designed especially for the advanced students, they were not suitable for lower-level ones. Most of our students fall into lower-level category”. Finally, four interviewees regarded the lack of reflection as another weak aspect in the course. In reference to that problem, a comment said by T2 is a sample of their views: “I feel that the course did not really help or add to me something special to reflect on it in my teaching practice”.

The Findings indicated that there was a total exclusion for teachers’ role in the development course. This suggests that this scenario is a good example of a top-down approach of professional development practised in the context of the study. Adopting such an approach implies that the teachers did not have any sort of input regarding any aspect of the development course such as the planning phase or the content. Consequently, this could lead to some shortcomings in the structure of development course. For example, some of the teachers’ needs cannot be identified by the trainers or organizers. In addition, some of the designed activities may not address the teachers’ needs or meet their students’ competency level. One more possible outcome is that the teachers may not like a certain style or mode of learning in the development course. These potential negative consequences can make the intended aims of the development course difficult to achieve. Therefore, Teachers’ need to be considered as a group of professionals who have the ability to expand useful development notions and participate in planning the content of their professional development programmes (Starkey et al., 2009). Their professional development needs to depend on their existing knowledge and understanding which are considered essential sources that can facilitate the exerted efforts of contemporary plans of professional development (Creswell & Creswell, 2017).

With respect to the second result about the activities above, one of the participants considered most of the available activities to be familiar and unchallenging for the teachers. In other words, they have not addressed the teachers’ real needs. This result might be attributed to the fact that teachers’ needs were not assessed before implementing this development course according to their qualifications level and their teaching context. Therefore, assessment of teachers’ needs analysis before establishing programmes goals (e.g., development course) for educational organizations seems an essential step, in order to identify the extent to which the participants’ needs are met in the offered programme (Coburn & Stein, 2006; Patton, Parker, & Tannehill, 2015). Moreover, the content of the professional development programme has to take into consideration the existing knowledge, skills and experience of the intended target group of the professional development course (Starkey et al., 2009).

In reference to the trainers-designed activities, they were far beyond the students’ actual level. This can indicate that the trainer did not have the background knowledge about the Saudi students’ linguistic competence, their learning culture and their language learning difficulties. Therefore, contextual knowledge about the targeted institution is a vital element in teacher education and a sound needs analysis can help identify students’ linguistic competence, their skills in acquiring English which can be a constructive background knowledge for a teacher trainer to build on for any future recommendations in a development course (Kosnik et al., 2015; Pennington & Richards, 2016).

Most participants felt that the offered activities did not help them reflect on their teaching experience. This possibly suggests that the trainer did not give enough attention to the reflective practices in the course content. Moreover, the way with which the trainer dealt with the reflective practices was inefficient to the extent that it led to such negative attitudes among the participants. Personally, I attended some development courses and I found the reflective activities stimulated the teachers to reflect on their teaching experience through recalling their development phases or situations which were significant or changed some of their previous beliefs or teaching practice. This view is in line with the argument of some researchers who contend that teachers need to be given the opportunities to reflect on their own personal teaching practices.

#### *4.4 Group Discussion*

According to the obtained data, all the interviewees have acknowledged that they benefited a lot from the group discussions that they had experienced during the workshop sessions and they were so useful for them. The following extract is an example of their positive responses along with his justification: “I liked the group discussion. I think it was very helpful, because with the group discussion you get at least to see other perspectives even if you disagree with them, you need to look at things from a different angle” as T2 explained.

The participants found the group discussion so fruitful for some possible reasons. First, the participants might have exchanged their views with their colleagues who had different perspectives which possibly gave them some useful insights regarding some classroom issues, some methodological aspects or some practical ways for tackling certain challenges that they faced with their students. This finding is similar to that of Good and Weaver

(2003) where high school teachers preferred workgroups and group discussion sessions and found them the most useful modes of instruction in the PD programmes.

The fourth research question of this study focuses on teachers' suggestions for future improvement of the development course.

#### *4.5 Suggestions for Future Improvement*

The overall participants' responses revealed some useful suggestions for future improvement in the context of the study. Their notions addressed the trainer's competence, needs analysis and involving teachers. In relation to the trainer's competence, four participants highlighted that the trainer needs to have certain characteristics. For example, T5 said: "The trainer should have good background knowledge about the context, teachers' backgrounds. He has to be experienced and competent as well". Another proposal regarding needs analysis was advocated by three interviewees. T3 is a sample example as follows: "Professional sessions should be conducted in the light of the thorough needs analysis of the teachers' needs". Teachers' involvement was another aspect that all the interviewees agreed upon. An example of this is expressed by T2 thus: "One of the main factors that help in success of the implemented professional development programme is the involvement of the teachers. I consider them the key factors of their own professional development".

The above finding indicates that two participants advocated some essential features that a trainer needs to have in order to implement an efficient development course, namely sufficient background knowledge about the intended context of the development course and knowledge of the teachers' backgrounds such as their qualifications and experiences. This will help greatly in designing activities that address the teachers' needs, meet their expectations, and assist teachers in reflection on their teaching practice. It might seem problematic to gain a lot from a development programme if the teacher trainer lacked these essential qualifications. In harmony with Starkey et al. (2009) views, it can be argued that an effective and successful professional development trainer has to have some high-quality features, such as the ability to address the teachers' needs adequately, and design activities that are relevant to their needs.

The second suggestion tackled the need for conducting a needs analysis as it was mentioned by one of the participants. It is a vital step which helps design and implements a well-planned and effective professional development course, because it assesses the teachers' needs, institutional needs, which could help design a rigorous course content that will assist in achieving the objectives of the PD course. In order to achieve that, needs analysis has to be part of the planning for a development course

The last recommendation emphasised the teachers' role in setting the development course agenda. This is essential since teachers need to be regarded as the stakeholders of their own professional development, as they are the targeted groups for whom the course was designed, to meet the new academic tasks of the institute. Thus, Senge (1990) stresses that the success of any adopted reform or introduced changes in any part of an institution depends widely on the engagement of teachers who take the responsibilities for implementing the new policy and classroom practices. Their participation can make the trainer aware of their needs, interests, and their preferred mode of development because he/she cannot know many things that they need. Additionally, this can motivate them more and make them feel more enthusiastic to develop either individually or collaboratively and become better language teachers.

#### **5. Limitations of the Study**

This study has a number of limitations that need to be acknowledged. For example, the method of data analysis was subjective, relying on the researcher's interpretation, and could have been made more vigorous by involving another independent researcher of the study, to confirm the analysis. At the level of methodology, the current study used only a qualitative research method. If it adopted a mixed method research design that combines both qualitative and quantitative forms in the study, it could have further explored the phenomenon under investigation to get more reliable data and minimize the chances of bias findings (Creswell & Clark, 2017). Finally, this study is also limited to the male participants who were willing to be interviewed, as it is culturally inappropriate for a male researcher to interview a female participant within the Saudi context.

#### **6. Conclusion**

The nature of this study explored the EFL teachers' beliefs about a professional development programme they have experienced, through the analysis of the primary data gathered from the semi-structured interviews. On one hand, the study yielded some shortcomings in relation to the implemented activities where some elements of the PDP may not have addressed the teachers' needs adequately and met the students' competence level in the teaching context. Furthermore, some of these activities have failed again to help the teachers to reflect on their

teaching practices. The data also revealed the absence of the teachers' role in the development programme that they attended. The emerged deficiencies are clear indicators of the increased need towards relocating the current implemented practices in professional development programmes in EFL contexts, in particular if they are associated with a change in an educational policy, in order to achieve the intended outcomes of the development programme. With respect to the participants, on the other hand, their responses showed that they had a broad awareness regarding some vital aspects related to the professional development and they have provided some solid suggestions that could have potential impacts on improving professional development programmes in EFL contexts, including the site of the study. It is the views of the author that such an outcome gives the teachers the chance to put their own development perspectives into the development programmes' content because they have the relevant qualifications, experience and background knowledge of their teaching environments. Most importantly, they know their own professional needs and interests. I believe that adopting this strategy could help create the culture of professional development in educational institutions and motivate the teachers to seek some useful means of development which address their individual needs and interests.

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