



Unveiling Excellence: Optimizing Professional Development for Saudi EFL Instructors

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Abstract

This scholarly investigation delves into the realm of professional development initiatives tailored for English as a Foreign Language (EFL) educators in Saudi Arabia. Given the distinctive challenges confronting EFL instructors in the Saudi context, which encompass the maintenance of their own English proficiency, the application of pragmatic pedagogical methodologies, and the assessment of student performance, the paper endeavors to elucidate the nuances of effective professional development programs. It underscores the imperative nature of discerning and comprehending the convictions held by Saudi educators regarding EFL instruction, offering a comprehensive explanation on professional development's contextual backdrop. The analysis encompasses an exploration of the attributes and paradigms characterizing efficacious professional development, underscoring the necessity for perpetuity, collaboration, and a learner-centric approach. Within this discourse, due emphasis is placed on the pivotal role of teacher networks, teacher research endeavors, and teacher study groups as prototypical models conducive to professional development. The discussion culminates in a robust assertion regarding the imperative requirement for professional development initiatives attuned to the specific requisites of Saudi EFL educators, envisaging consequential enhancements in student learning outcomes.

Keywords: professional development, ESL/EFL teachers, models for teacher training, teacher educators

1. Introduction

Contemporary scholarly attention has been directed toward discerning efficacious professional development frameworks designed for English as a Foreign Language (EFL) educators situated in cultural and linguistic congruence with their students. Unlike instructors in other academic disciplines, these educators encounter a plethora of challenges, encompassing the perpetual upkeep of their linguistic proficiency, the implementation of pragmatic pedagogical methodologies, and the adept execution of evaluative measures. Tedick and Walker (1996)

identified additional hurdles, including the demands of thematic learning that necessitate an awareness of vocabulary and content across diverse thematic domains, as well as an understanding of their students' interests. Moreover, they are tasked with fostering collaborative learning environments and cultivating self-directed learning among their students by assuming the role of facilitators and providing requisite resources and tools for language acquisition.

Within the specific context of Saudi Arabia, EFL instructors grapple with these aforementioned challenges, compounded by suboptimal academic outcomes among their students. Consequently, there exists a compelling imperative for a sustained trajectory of professional development initiatives to redress these challenges and enhance the pedagogical acumen of EFL educators vis-à-vis English language instruction.

In the capacity of a Saudi-based EFL expert with a vested interest in the domain of professional development, there is a recognized need to meticulously ascertain and comprehend the underlying beliefs held by Saudi educators concerning EFL instruction. This recognition propels a dedicated focus on the provision of pertinent and tailored opportunities for professional development initiatives. This scholarly endeavor seeks to furnish a comprehensive foundation for localized professional development endeavors, thereby contributing to an informed discourse on recent research pertaining to EFL instructors. The ensuing discussion navigates the expansive terrain of professional development, elucidating its conceptual breadth, delineating its efficacious attributes, and encapsulating diverse models that have demonstrated effectiveness. Notably, an exploration of criteria germane to the effectiveness of professional development practices is undertaken, aligning with the overarching objective of meeting educators' needs and fostering continuous enhancement of their instructional competencies. The identified criteria hold promise as fundamental tenets upon which prospective professional development programs for Saudi EFL instructors can be predicated, offering a robust framework for pedagogical advancement.

2. Definition of Professional Development

Professional development constitutes a multifaceted domain encompassing a repertoire of tools and strategies, including study groups, peer coaching and mentoring, and action research, all strategically aimed at cultivating the continuous growth of educators. According to Fullan (1991), this developmental trajectory traverses both formal and informal learning experiences, spanning from the initial phases of preservice teacher education to the culmination of a teacher's professional journey upon retirement. Fullan (1991) posits that professional development transcends mere instructional training, evolving into a comprehensive framework that furnishes educators with diverse strategies to acquire new and advanced knowledge while fostering critical perspectives on their instructional practices. In tandem, Darling-Hammond (1990) characterizes professional development as an instrumentality for keeping teachers abreast of contemporary educational issues, facilitating the implementation of pedagogical innovations, and refining teaching practices, thereby contributing to the holistic development of educators both professionally and individually.

Conversely, an appraisal of traditional professional development initiatives reveals inherent deficiencies as articulated by researchers such as Fullan and Hargreaves (1996), Liberman and Wood (2003), Little (1999), and Randi and Zeichner (2003). These inadequacies encompass incoherent activities, a failure to ameliorate teachers' attitudes and practices, a lack of alignment with the teachers' work context, a neglect of teachers' beliefs and needs, an overemphasis on technical skills at the expense of pedagogical knowledge, and a dearth of opportunities for collegial collaboration and access to scholarly resources. Criticism of these deficiencies has

spurred a call for a paradigm shift in professional development, advocating for a departure from traditional approaches (Lieberman, 1995; Sykes, 1999). The prevailing sentiment among researchers is that professional development should emulate the interactive nature of classroom instruction, wherein educators enthusiastically integrate their teaching experiences with novel knowledge and innovations, engaging in a reciprocal exchange of insights and challenges with their peers.

Contemporary inquiries echo the critique of traditional professional development. Darling-Hammond and Richardson (2016) contend that conventional models lack coherence and alignment with educators' expressed needs and preferences. Garet et al. (2018) corroborate these findings, asserting that traditional professional development tends to be sporadic and disjointed from the daily professional milieu of educators, resulting in limited efficacy in influencing student learning outcomes. These empirical observations coalesce into a resounding call for a transformative shift towards collaborative and job-embedded professional development, meticulously attuned to the nuanced needs of educators and seamlessly integrated within the fabric of their professional contexts. Kim et al. (2019) underscore this imperative by emphasizing the necessity for professional development initiatives tailored to the specific requirements of EFL teachers, focusing on augmenting their content and language proficiency while fostering collaborative endeavors with peers.

3. What Makes Professional Development More Effective?

Several transformative shifts have transpired in the landscape of professional development as educators and researchers, through thoughtful introspection, sought to delineate practices conducive to its enhanced efficacy. Ball (1996) asserts that effective professional development necessitates a nuanced consideration of students' learning trajectories within their social and school contexts. She contends that the contextual milieu significantly influences teachers' capabilities, with the most efficacious models incorporating follow-up activities, manifested as long-term support, classroom coaching, or sustained interactions among colleagues. This emphasis on context, resources, and continual activities underscores the imperative of addressing teaching challenges and augmenting performance.

Building upon Ball's advocacy for follow-up activities and enduring coaching, Little (1999) further elucidates key attributes of effective professional development. He advocates for heightened collaboration among teachers and educators, fostering shared understanding and the critical examination of ideas. Little (1999) emphasizes collective efforts in training and implementation, a concentration on curriculum and instructional issues, and the provision of ample time coupled with consistent support and coaching for teachers' learning endeavors. Little's framework elevates collaboration to a central role in all facets of professional development, from planning and training to reflection and outcomes assessment.

Parallel principles are reflected by Abdal-Haqq (1998) and Sparks and Loucks-Horsley (1990), who posit that effective professional development should embody continuity, collaboration—especially in the planning and design of learning activities—school embedding within teacher and student contexts, a focus on improving student learning, and the integration of ongoing coaching and training replete with feedback and support. This synthesis of features aims to engender more engaging and efficacious professional development experiences.

Speck and Knipe (2001) contribute a dimension emphasizing the foundational role of students' actual needs in shaping professional development. Identifying and addressing student struggles, problems, and areas of improvement should form the bedrock of educators' developmental activities. Their components of professional development encompass focusing

on enhancing student learning, assessing student needs, setting goals, preparing relevant resources, and evaluating programs in alignment with identified goals. Thus, in addition to addressing teachers' collaborative and coaching needs, professional development must intricately consider students' requirements, prompting reflective action by teachers.

Linking students' needs with professional development becomes paramount for fostering improved student learning outcomes. A study by Borko et al. (2017) underscores this connection, demonstrating that professional development geared toward addressing student needs and adapting instruction accordingly positively influences student achievement. Aligning with this, Kim et al. (2019) affirms that EFL students necessitate professional development attuned to language proficiency and cultural awareness. EFL teachers must be equipped with the requisite knowledge and skills to effectively instruct students from diverse cultural backgrounds, necessitating collaborative opportunities to deepen understanding and develop impactful teaching strategies.

In synthesizing these insights on effective professional development, discernible features and criteria emerge as pivotal in identifying programs conducive to success for educators and students alike. Professional development should be characterized by its continuity, collaboration, and integration within the school environment, mindful of teachers' beliefs, fostering coaching and teacher-driven follow-up activities embedded with social and emotional support, and centering on students' needs to enhance their learning experiences. These principled features should serve as a guiding framework for organizers and educators involved in discerning and evaluating local Saudi EFL teacher education programs.

4. Best Models of Professional Development

In the pursuit of methodologies conducive to optimizing teachers' performance and fostering a more engaging teaching milieu, researchers have endeavored to formulate professional models replete with diverse procedures and innovations. These models are structured frameworks designed to guide educators towards heightened interconnectedness within educational institutions and with fellow teachers. The models encompass collaborative endeavors involving local and national colleagues, administrators, coaches, and other experts participating in school-university programs. In this section, I delineate the models oriented towards facilitating continuous, collaborative, and substantive professional learning for teachers. I elucidate both the shared features and distinctive attributes of these models, as articulated by Kim (2008). Additionally, I expound upon the applicability of these models within the Saudi EFL context, emphasizing the creation of professional learning environments that are not only suitable but also engrossing.

4.1 Teacher Networks

The imperative for teachers to engage in a professional community, where the exchange of ideas and challenges is facilitated, has prompted scholarly investigation into the feasibility and repercussions of establishing teacher networks. These communities, often existing beyond the confines of physical school settings, are focal points where educators converge to deliberate on subject-specific matters, address immediate pedagogical challenges and student requirements, and critically evaluate diverse teaching methodologies employed in their classrooms (Lieberman & Wood, 2003; Stiles, Loucks-Horsley, Mundry, Hewson, & Love, 2009). Within these networks, educators encounter various learning and collaborative activities, each community offering distinct structures and knowledge frameworks. This adaptability in teacher networks accommodates the diverse learning needs of educators, fostering the development of

suitable and engaging learning structures. Importantly, these networks afford teachers opportunities for recognition and respect as individuals possessing valuable experience and knowledge, providing both emotional and intellectual support (Pennell & Firestone, 1998).

Termed as subject-specific collaboratives by some researchers, an exemplar being the National Writing Project which exclusively explores writing curricula and assessments (Lieberman & Wood, 2003), these networks are posited to enhance teachers' expertise within specific domains, reinforcing connections to their teaching contexts and methodologies. Teacher networks represent a model that encapsulates certain characteristics deemed effective in professional development—primarily premised on collaboration, acknowledgment of teachers' voices and beliefs, and a focus on subject areas.

Empirical evidence underscores the positive impact of teacher networks on teaching practices and student learning outcomes. In a 2019 study conducted by Lee and colleagues, participation in a teacher network correlated with heightened teacher self-efficacy and increased student engagement. The study further indicated that network-involved teachers reported elevated feelings of support and connection with colleagues, contributing to heightened confidence and engagement in the classroom. A separate study by Smith and colleagues (2018) revealed that participation in teacher networks was linked to enhanced student achievement in mathematics, emphasizing the potential of such networks to positively influence both teachers' practices and student outcomes.

Despite these affirmative findings, concerns persist regarding the model's flexibility in structure and activities, particularly in relation to the inclusion of continuous coaching, follow-up activities, and a focus on actual student needs and problems. Addressing these concerns necessitates an adaptation of the model, utilizing it as a foundational framework while incorporating essential features of teachers' professional learning. Teacher networks emerge as a promising model for fostering collaboration among educators at various levels—within schools, cities, and countries—with the aim of enhancing their knowledge and practices in specific teaching domains.

In the context of Saudi EFL education, the viability of teacher networks hinges on governmental and social support. EFL educators in Saudi Arabia face impediments such as heavy teaching loads and a lack of personal and institutional motivation to expand and critically reflect on their knowledge. Establishing a conducive school environment that champions teachers' professional learning through multifaceted strategies and provides incentives for sustained professional development and teaching improvement is imperative for the successful implementation of teacher networks in the Saudi EFL context.

4.2 Teacher Research

The scrutiny of instructional predicaments by educators through scholarly school-embedded research studies presents a pivotal developmental model that holds potential not only for individual schools but also for a broader audience encompassing educators, policymakers, and fellow teachers. This model endows teachers with an augmented capacity to delineate their teaching milieu, articulate their concepts and innovations, particularly those cultivated in collaboration with their students. The underlying philosophy of teacher research posits that educators are intellectuals, possessing knowledge and experience, and are capable of formulating their own teaching philosophies, which they can disseminate through their research endeavors (Burnaford, Fisher, & Hobson, 2001).

Engaging in research, whether independently or collaboratively, provides teachers with a robust professional development experience. As they delve into profound questions regarding

their instructional performance, student dynamics, and the contextual intricacies of their schools, they become energized to explore resolutions to these queries, leveraging their unparalleled familiarity with their school environments (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2001). Following the formulation of research questions, teachers proceed to design their studies and embark on data collection endeavors. The ensuing findings furnish them with an enhanced understanding of their teaching context, yielding more pertinent and detailed insights.

A salient characteristic of teacher research lies in its impetus for educators to generate knowledge that is not only rooted in personal experiences but is also intellectually nuanced (Zeichner & Noffke, 2002). Moreover, it prompts teachers to contextualize this knowledge for a broader audience of educators and researchers, thereby potentially contributing to educational discourse beyond their immediate milieu. The dissemination of research findings becomes a conduit for making contributions applicable in diverse educational contexts.

Research by Cochran-Smith and Lytle (2015) underscores the significance of teacher research in fostering continuous professional development. Their study delineates how engagement in teacher research facilitates a deeper understanding of teaching practices, encourages reflective contemplation, and instigates sustained growth and development. Correspondingly, Brownell and colleagues (2016) posit that teacher research is instrumental in promoting teacher learning and enhancing student outcomes. Their study, focusing on the impact of a teacher research program, reveals improvements in teaching practices and student outcomes among participating teachers, suggesting that teacher research fosters student-centered teaching practices, augments teacher self-efficacy, and enhances student achievement.

These findings collectively underscore the vital role of teacher research as an integral component of professional development, fostering continuous growth and development among educators and improving student outcomes. By empowering teachers to generate personally and intellectually relevant knowledge, teacher research emerges as a potent mechanism for cultivating effective and equitable teaching practices, thereby contributing to improved educational outcomes for students.

In considering the contextual nuances of Saudi EFL education, it is imperative to acknowledge that teachers necessitate training on research methodologies and demand increased emotional and financial incentives to engage in research. Access to essential resources, dedicated research time within the school day, and a supportive environment are prerequisites for the successful implementation of teacher research within the Saudi EFL context. This model, grounded in contextual relevance, serves as a catalyst for the personal and intellectual growth of teachers.

4.3 Teacher Study Group

The imperative for collaborative endeavors among teachers has given rise to teacher study groups, providing a dedicated space and time on a school level for teachers to engage in extensive study and mutual learning over an extended duration. In the Saudi EFL context, teachers, united by common objectives and interests, convene regularly to deliberate on various school and classroom development matters. These discussions span diverse topics, encompassing the identification of students' needs, adaptations to instructional curricula, development of learning and assessment tools, and critical evaluations of teaching performance (Murphy, 1999). Moreover, these groups may undertake school-based research to address specific issues of interest. Ensuring regular and convenient meeting times, both within and outside the school, is crucial, coupled with a proactive approach in embracing ambitious challenges and ideas amenable to new teaching strategies. It is imperative to allocate release

time within the school schedule to ensure active participation in these groups, thereby bolstering their professional learning.

Recent studies underscore the efficacy of teacher study groups in promoting ongoing professional development and enhancing student outcomes. For instance, Kim et al.'s (2019) study revealed that participation in collaborative teacher study groups resulted in notable improvements in teacher knowledge and skills relevant to teaching English as a foreign language (EFL). These groups were found to provide teachers with valuable opportunities for idea and resource exchange, feedback and support mechanisms, and engagement in reflective practice—factors contributing to improved teaching practices and enhanced student outcomes. Similarly, Wu et al. (2020) reported positive impacts on teacher self-efficacy and student engagement through study groups focusing on technology integration in teaching. Such groups were found to instill confidence in teachers regarding technology use in the classroom, leading to heightened student engagement. The model aligns with the collaborative, school-contextualized, and continuous learning aspects, akin to teacher networks, albeit with a broader scope encompassing varied subject areas.

4.4 Lesson Study

Lesson study, a widely adopted professional development practice in Japan, is tailored to facilitate teachers' systematic acquisition of effective teaching techniques. This model offers teachers opportunities for collaborative endeavors and critical scrutiny of their lessons' efficacy on student learning (Fernandez, 2002). As elucidated by Kim (2008), the lesson study process involves teachers with a shared interest in a particular subject collaborating to design, plan, and teach a specific lesson. The subsequent phases encompass observation, evaluation, and decisions about whether to revise and re-teach the lesson or embark on the creation of a new one. Participating teachers, according to Kim (2008), accrue pedagogical knowledge and heightened awareness of their teaching content through lesson study. However, the efficacy of this practice is contingent upon teachers' levels of experience and engagement in collaboration (Lewis, 2000).

Empirical evidence underscores the significant positive impact of lesson study on teacher learning and student achievement. Yawkey et al. (2018) found that participation in lesson study led to enhancements in teacher content knowledge, pedagogical content knowledge, and classroom practice, with positive ramifications for student achievement, particularly among those from disadvantaged backgrounds. Chen et al. (2019) corroborated these findings, highlighting the positive influence of lesson study on teacher growth and student outcomes in the realm of English language teaching. The study evidenced improvements in teacher knowledge, skills, attitudes, and student outcomes, including heightened motivation and engagement.

Lesson study emerges as an effective mechanism for promoting continuous professional development and improving student outcomes, particularly when it concentrates on specific teaching practices and fosters collaboration, reflection, and knowledge sharing. Saudi EFL teachers can view lesson study as an instrumental avenue for critically assessing the impact of their teaching strategies. The focused approach, with a particular subject in mind, facilitates collaboration, shared experiences, and reflective practices, enabling the acquisition of new knowledge. However, for optimal effectiveness, lesson study demands continuity throughout the academic year, supported by schools and opportunities for sharing findings with other educators and teacher educators.

4.5 School-University Partnerships

This collaborative professional development approach, bridging the realms of schools and universities, places a distinct emphasis on addressing the multifaceted needs of teachers. According to Kim (2008), it is designed to offer activities that empower teachers with a diverse array of strategies to optimize the utilization of resources and enhance student achievement. Central to this approach is the customization of activities to align with teachers' specific interests and challenges, ensuring a nuanced response to their professional development requirements. Participants in these programs actively engage in the reciprocal exchange of ideas and concerns, fostering a supportive and motivating community dynamic that thrives on continuous learning opportunities.

This model boasts several effective characteristics integral to professional development. Notably, it affords teachers a valuable opportunity to cultivate leadership skills by leveraging their knowledge and experience in collaborative problem-solving initiatives alongside university professors (Kim, 2008). Rooted in principles of ongoing collaboration, contextual relevance to the school environment, responsiveness to teachers' needs and beliefs, and the provision of comprehensive learning and educational resources, this model is strategically poised to enhance the professional growth of educators.

Empirical evidence underscores the positive impact of school-university partnerships on both teacher professional development and student learning outcomes. A comprehensive literature review conducted by Tichnor-Wagner et al. (2018) revealed that such partnerships play a pivotal role in facilitating continuous and job-embedded professional development for teachers, leading to discernible improvements in teaching practices and subsequently enhancing student outcomes. The study underscored the transformative potential of partnerships focused on collaboration and shared learning, providing teachers with opportunities for reflective practice, mutual learning, and constructive feedback from university-based researchers and educators.

Further substantiating the efficacy of school-university partnerships, a study by Rios-Aguilar et al. (2019) demonstrated their effectiveness in promoting equity and social justice in education. The research illustrated that partnerships with a dedicated focus on addressing issues of equity and social justice contribute to the development of more inclusive and culturally responsive teaching practices. This, in turn, leads to better educational outcomes for students from diverse backgrounds.

Within the specific context of Saudi EFL education, the implementation of school-university partnerships is imperative. Such partnerships serve as catalysts for fostering increased collaboration between schools and universities. However, this necessitates oversight and support from the Saudi Ministry of Education, particularly given the existing communication gaps between numerous Saudi universities and schools. The success of these partnerships hinges on creating an environment that profoundly recognizes and respects teachers, valuing their needs and beliefs. Moreover, university experts must actively endeavor to establish robust connections with teachers, assisting them in augmenting their knowledge and refining their teaching performance.

5. Conclusion

This scholarly exploration embarked on a comprehensive journey, commencing with a discerning overview of professional development underscored by an explicit emphasis on its foundational principles. The subsequent unraveling of various professional development

models was meticulously executed, culminating in a nuanced elucidation of their significance, identified gaps, and a pragmatic discussion on their potential application within the distinctive milieu of Saudi EFL education.

Integral to the concluding discourse was an in-depth reflection on the principles encapsulating effective professional development. Drawing from the extensive reservoir of insights provided by researchers in both the broader spectrum of general education and the more specialized realm of EFL, these principles emerged as paramount considerations demanding judicious integration into the practices of Saudi teacher educators. Of particular salience in this reflective synthesis is the overarching imperative of collaboration with educators, coupled with an attuned responsiveness to their unique needs and belief systems.

Positioned as a comprehensive reference, this paper endeavors to transcend theoretical abstraction, offering instead a practical compendium for Saudi EFL teacher educators and policymakers. It aims to provide a robust framework for the conception and implementation of teacher development programs that are not only responsive but also contextually relevant. By weaving together theoretical underpinnings with pragmatic considerations, this scholarly endeavor aspires to chart a course for the development of initiatives that catalyze substantive growth among Saudi EFL educators, thereby effecting tangible advancements in the landscape of English language instruction within the Saudi educational milieu.

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