



Journal homepage: <https://jll.uoch.edu.pk/index.php/jll>

A Case Study of an Online /Distance Learning Professional Development Course of EFL Teachers in Pakistan

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Abstract

Professional development plays a crucial role in enhancing teachers' skills and knowledge in their respective subjects. According to Freeman (2004), second language teacher education encompasses both initial preparation and ongoing professional growth. This study aims to explore the perspectives of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers in Pakistan regarding online professional development courses. Specifically, the study seeks to investigate how these teachers perceive the implementation of such courses in terms of their impact on teaching effectiveness, the creation of a community of practice through interaction, the support provided by tutors throughout the course, and the relevance of course content.

Using a mixed-method approach, this study employed questionnaires to collect quantitative data and conducted semi-structured interviews to gather qualitative insights. The participants consisted of male and female English language teachers from Pakistan.

The research findings shed light on various aspects of teachers' perspectives, highlighting the effectiveness of online professional development courses for English teachers. The key findings indicate that these courses positively influence teaching skills, facilitate the establishment of a community of practice through collaborative interaction, offer substantial support from tutors throughout the duration of the course, and contribute to the enhancement of subject knowledge. Ultimately, this study serves to inform EFL teachers and educators in other subject areas about the advantages of engaging in online professional development opportunities.

Keywords:

online professional development,
continuing professional development,
community of practice

Introduction

Continuous Professional Development (CPD) for Teachers

Continuous professional development (CPD) is a crucial aspect of a teacher's career. Defined by Reimers (2003, p. 10), CPD is "a continuous process comprising regular opportunities and practices intended systematically to promote growth and develop expertise in the field." Schools implement CPD activities through in-house training, workshops, seminars, and occasionally through initiatives taken by teachers based on their formal and informal experiences. Such professional growth activities are vital for educators to stay updated with the latest advancements in education, including pedagogy, theories, and content (Rawal, Aslam, and Jamil, 2013).

To meet the needs of 21st-century learners, teachers must have a comprehensive understanding of CPD. In Pakistan, fresh graduates are often hired based on their proficiency in both language and subject specialization, with less emphasis on pre-service and teacher training certificates. Consequently, it is essential for school administrators

and leaders to conduct CPD workshops not only for newly recruited teachers but for the entire staff (Nooruddin & Bhamani, 2019).

Continuous Professional Development for Language Teachers

Craft (2000) defines professional development as "a wide range of events intended to help in the grooming of instructors who complete the maiden training." Freeman (2004) uses the term "second language teacher education" to encompass both teachers' initial professional preparation and their ongoing professional development.

English language instructors are increasingly interested in continuing professional development (CPD). CPD enables them to enhance their knowledge and skills, which they can then apply to their teaching methods to improve the effectiveness and success of their courses (Crandall & Christison, 2016; Hashimoto & Nguyen, 2018; Wilden & Porsch, 2017).

In-Person and Distance Learning

A previous study on teacher professional development in Pakistan revealed significant challenges within the country's teacher training programs (Abbasi, 2015). In some cases, instructors are entirely unaware of how to use ICT tools, making their implementation difficult (Majoka, Fazal, & Khan, 2013). Another study emphasized that well-designed and practical professional development should be regarded as a critical component of the educational system, helping students acquire the knowledge necessary to thrive in the twenty-first century (Darling-Hammond, Hyler, & Gardner, 2017).

The availability of internet resources and the flexibility of virtual courses make virtual education an indispensable aspect of higher education (Li & Irby, 2008; Luyt, 2013; Lyons, 2004). Additionally, the needs of students and the financial constraints faced by various higher education institutions are driving these institutions to place greater emphasis on offering virtual education (Limperos, Buckner, Kaufmann, & Frisby, 2015). Given the numerous benefits virtual education provides to institutions, staff, and students, it is unsurprising that it has garnered significant interest (Konetes, 2011).

Empirical Studies on Online/Distance CPD

Some online professional development programs are associated with various types of in-person professional development such as virtual conferences, virtual activities, and virtual communication. Different studies have been carried out to investigate various ways of online professional development for English language teachers (for example, Kabilan, Adlina, & Embi, 2011, Magidin de Kramer et al., 2012; Liu, 2012; Silvia, 2015; Alimirzaee & Ashraf, 2016; McCall, 2018). Online professional development is an excellent kind of teacher education that can improve English language instructors' teaching skills.

McCall (2018) investigated topic teachers' attitudes toward an online professional development program in government schools in the US that served a significant number of English language learners. Instructors acknowledged that the virtual program improved the preparation strategy for English Language Learners lessons in topic classrooms. On the other hand, Silvia (2015), investigated English language instructors' perceptions about Coursera online professional development courses in various contexts. Teachers' attitudes were investigated using Guskey's (2000) five layers of information: (1) reaction of participants, (2) learning of participants, (3) organization support and change, (4) participants' use of new knowledge and skills, and (5) student learning outcomes. Usually, instructors had optimistic behaviour towards the experience of OPD. In addition, they stated that the OPD had a good effect on their teaching methods and students' learning. Enhancing the accomplishments and growth of English language students is significantly impacted by the development of English language instructors' teaching abilities and knowledge through online professional development.

Online professional development significantly enhanced English language teachers' teaching abilities and knowledge, which has a great effect on English language learners' performance and development. Magidin de Kramer et al. (2012) used a quasi-experimental way to test the effects of the OPD program on teaching practices. The course consists of virtual workshops and virtual teacher to teacher discussions. It provided the best pedagogical skills for improving reading comprehension skills, writing, and vocabulary techniques. The results highlighted that the OPD course had a substantial impact on instructors' content knowledge, their writing and vocabulary teaching techniques. Moreover, it also improved students' reading comprehension skills.

Online professional development platforms can encourage meaningful and useful communication among English language teachers; thereby, they enhance instructors' awareness, learning, and teaching abilities. According to Liu (2012), participating in a virtual video case discussion was witnessed as a positive professional development chance by Taiwanese pre-service and in-service EFL instructors. Furthermore, Alimirzaee and Ashraf (2016) looked at the effect of exchanging virtual peer information among Iranian EFL teachers on their development in an experimental study. As compared to the control group, which got similar instructions without any exchange of ideas, the experimental group that was involved in a virtual discussion scored higher on the post-test of teaching knowledge test. In addition, Kabilan, Adlina, and Embi (2011) looked at how a project relating to online collaboration and discussion impacted Malaysian English language instructors' professional advancement. They revealed that English language teachers acknowledged their relevant online professional development experience since it provided them a chance to interact and share their knowledge and teaching experience.

At present, technology has an important place in the context of English language teaching context. Technology integration can encourage students and promote successful, enjoyable, and engaging learning environments in English language classrooms. Online professional development can be a great chance for English language teachers to enhance their IT knowledge and technical proficiency. Murugaiah et al. (2010) investigated the use of blogging to get Malaysian English language teachers at a smart school involved in a virtual community of practice where they could share their knowledge and experiences. The findings revealed that instructor engagement on articles was effective in exposing instructors to and improving a variety of technical skills necessary for adopting computer-assisted instruction.

In the Arab setting, Kabilan, and Rajab (2010) examined how EFL teachers in Palestine used the internet to progress in their careers. Despite the obstacles that EFL teachers had related to the internet's accessibility and facilities, teachers acknowledged that it considerably assisted in boosting their professional development via knowledge-sharing with other instructors.

Research questions

The main purpose of this study was to investigate Pakistani EFL teachers' perspectives towards attending the online professional development courses in Pakistan. This research seeks to answer the following research questions:

R.Q-1- What is the impact of taking online professional development course on teachers?

R.Q-2- What are teachers' perceptions of their interaction opportunities to create a community of practice?

Method

The researcher utilized a mixed methods approach, incorporating both questionnaires and semi-structured interviews for data collection. The questionnaire, comprising close-ended items, facilitated efficient data collection, but as noted by Dörnyei (2007), it may suffer from the limitation that respondents' contributions could be superficial. Nevertheless, questionnaires are valuable for swiftly gathering a large volume of data.

Subsequently, semi-structured interviews were conducted to delve deeper into participants' perspectives, addressing the potential limitation of superficial responses observed in the questionnaire survey. This approach allowed for a more thorough exploration of the research questions and provided richer insights into the experiences and viewpoints of the participants.

Data analysis involved descriptive analysis for the quantitative questionnaire data and thematic analysis for the qualitative interview data, ensuring a comprehensive examination of the research questions from both quantitative and qualitative perspectives.

Sampling

Thirty-three English language teachers from higher secondary schools in Punjab, Pakistan participated, selected based on their attendance at a 5-week EFL professional development online course held in November 2022. Sponsored by the Regional English Language Office, US Embassy, Islamabad, and administered by Evolution Igniting Future, Karachi, Pakistan, the course titled "Teaching Grammar Communicatively (TGC)" was the focus of investigation.

Convenience sampling was employed, resulting in a diverse sample of teachers with varying teaching experience and qualifications. Demographic statistics revealed participant characteristics:

****Table 1: Participants' Gender****

Gender	Number of Participants	Percentage
Male	17	51.51%
Female	14	42.42%
Prefer not to say	02	6.06%

****Table 2: Participants' Years of EFL Teaching****

Years of Experience	Number of Participants	Percentage
1 year	5	15.15%
2 years	6	18.18%
3 years	1	3.03%
4 years	2	6.06%
More than 5 years	19	57.57%

****Table 3: Participants' Qualification****

Qualification	Number of Participants	Percentage
Bachelor's	14	42.42%
Master's	10	30.30%
M. Phil	9	27.27%
PhD	0	0%

These methodological approaches, coupled with the insights from Dörnyei (2007) regarding questionnaire surveys, enhance the rigor and validity of the study's findings, providing a comprehensive understanding of the impact of online professional development courses on English language teachers in Pakistan.

Findings and data Analysis

Table 1 - Analysis

R.Q-1- What is the impact of taking an online professional development course on teachers?

	Strongly agree		Agree		Neither agree nor disagreed		Disagree		Strongly disagree.		total	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
The online professional development course had a positive impact on my teaching methods.	4	42.42%	7	51.51%	2	6.06%	0	%	0	%	3	00%
The professional development program helped	7	51.51%	4	42.42%	2	6.06%	0	%	0	%	3	00%

me develop a greater understanding of teaching grammar communicatively for teaching.												
The professional development activities helped me integrate “teaching grammar communicatively” material into my situation.	7	51.51%	3	39.39%	2	6.06%	0	%	0	%	3	00%

As can be seen from Table 1, teachers were asked questions related to research question#1 in the questionnaire. The teachers responded with strongly agree (N = 14, 42.42%), agree (N = 17, 51.51), neither agree nor disagree (N = 2, 6.06%), and none of the teachers rated disagree (N = 0, 0%) or strongly disagree (N = 0, 0%) about the question of the positive impact of an online professional development course. In other words, the majority of the teachers (N = 31, 93.93%) responded with a combination of strongly agree and agree that the online professional development course had a positive impact on their teaching methods . Similarly, the majority also responded strongly agree (N = 17, 51.51%), agree (N = 14, 42.42%), neither agree nor disagree (N = 02, 6.06%), and none of the teachers rated disagree (N=0, 0%) or strongly disagree (N=0, 0%) about the helpfulness of the TGC course in developing understanding for teaching. In response to this question (N = 31, 93.93%), teachers were rated as either strongly agree or agree that the professional development program helped them develop a greater understanding of teaching grammar communicatively for teaching. The third question responses depict that the majority of the teachers strongly agree (N = 17, 51.51%) and agree (N = 13, 39.39%). Neither agree nor disagree (N = 02, 6.06%) declared that the professional development activities helped them integrate teaching grammar communicatively material into their situation, and none of the teachers rated disagree (N = 0, 0%) and strongly disagree (0=N, 0%) about this question. The overall responses indicated that the vast majority of the teachers (N = 30, 90) responded either strongly agree or agree to the statement, "The professional development activities helped me integrate teaching grammar communicatively material into my situation.

Table 2 - Analysis

4.2.2. R.Q.2- What are teachers’ perceptions of their interaction opportunities to create a community of practice?

	Strongly agree		Agree		Neither agree nor disagreed		Disagree		Strongly disagree.		Total	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
I frequently gave comments to peers’ reflections and other posts on discussion	9	7.27%	9	7.57%	3	.09%	2	.06%	0	%	3	100%

board in the modules of each week.:												
Comments sharing with peers was useful for developing better understanding of the questions given on the discussion board.	4	42.42%	7	1.51%	2	.06%	0	0%	0	0%	3	100%
Giving feedback on peer's comments on the discussion board enabled me to reflect about my idea.:	9	27.27%	9	7.57%	3	.09%	2	6.06%	0	%	3	100%
WhatsApp group helped me to interact with teacher and other participants regarding course activities and challenges regularly	7	1.51%	5	5.45%	1	.03%	0	0%	0	%	3	100%

Table 2 demonstrates the statistics regarding teachers' responses to the questionnaire related to research question #1. The teachers responded with strongly agree (N = 9, 27.27%), agree (N = 19, 57.57%), neither agree nor disagree (N = 3, 9.09%), and disagree (N = 2, 6.06%). None of the teachers rated strongly disagreed (N = 0, 0%) about the statement "I frequently gave comments to peers' reflections and other posts on discussion board in the modules of each week." Overall, the majority of the teachers (N = 28, 84.84%) responded with a combination of strongly agree and agree that I frequently gave comments to peers' reflections and other posts on the discussion board in the modules of each week.

Teachers responded with strongly agree (N = 14, 42.42%) agree (N = 17, 51.51%), while neither agree nor disagree (N = 02, 6.06%), and none of the teachers opted to disagree (N=0, 0%) and strongly disagree (N = 0, 0%) or strongly disagreeing (N = 0, 0%) that Comments sharing with peers was useful for developing a better understanding of the questions given on the discussion board. In response to this question (N = 31, 93.93%),

teachers were rated as either strongly agree or agree that Comments sharing with peers was useful for developing a better understanding of the questions given on the discussion board.

Results indicate that teachers strongly agree (N = 9, 27.27%) and agree (N = 19, 57.57%). Neither agree nor disagree (N = 03, 9.09%) disagree (N = 2, 6.06%) with the statement 'Giving feedback on peers' comments on the discussion board enabled me to reflect about my idea, and none of the teachers responded strongly disagree (N = 0, 0%) about this question. The overall responses showed that the majority of the teachers (N = 28, 84.84%) responded either strongly agreed or agreed to the statement that giving feedback on peers comments on the discussion board enabled them to reflect about their idea."

Responses witnessed in the third question indicate that the majority of the teachers strongly agree (N = 17, 51.51%) and agree (N = 15, 45.45%). Neither agree nor disagree (N = 01, 3.03%) with the statement. The WhatsApp group helped me to interact with the teacher and other participants regarding course activities and challenges regularly, and none of the teachers opted to disagree (N = 0, 0%) and strongly disagree (N = 0, 0%) about this question. The overall responses showed that the majority of the teachers (N = 28, 84.84%) either strongly agree or agree that the WhatsApp group helped them interact with teachers and other participants regarding course activities and challenges regularly.

Qualitative Data

After analyzing the quantitative data analysis stage, the consenting participants (5 teachers) were asked to participate in semi-structured interviews on secured, scheduled Zoom® platform sessions. Once all five interviews were completed, the audio from those interviews was transcribed by zoom option, and the relevant qualitative data was coded and thematically analysed for the identification of common emergent themes amongst the participants.

There were four major themes on which the participant teachers collectively voiced their opinions. The first major element is more of a consolidation of the findings in the quantitative data, where all the teachers expressed their overall impact of the online course.

Theme: 1-Impact of PD Online Course

The majority of the teachers expressed a collective opinion about the overall impact of taking an online professional development course. They believe that the course positively affected their teaching and knowledge. One of the teachers stated:

Participant 2: "My thinking, my perception about teaching. It's totally changed. So that was my first. After the first meeting, it got changed and it had a very positive change."

Another teacher shared similar thoughts regarding the impact of the online professional development course in terms of enhancing their skills and knowledge.

Participant: 3

Well, the expectations were quite clear that the grammar is something quite fundamental to every level of teaching so I believe being part of TGC was something that will make it more.

Theme: 2- Interaction Opportunities to Create a Community of Practice

Another significant theme emerged from the teachers' opinions, indicating that the online course fostered a sense of community of practice through various means. Participants engaged in discussions on the Canvas platform by commenting on each other's responses to given prompts. Teachers also actively participated by providing feedback on the participants' views. The majority of teachers expressed that these interactions allowed them to engage with their peers and teachers, thus fostering a community of practice through multiple channels. One participant shared their experience:

Participant 3: "Our online course was transitional in nature. So, there were two main aspects to consider. One was the Canvas platform, which facilitated interaction among peers and provided a convenient means for communication with the teacher or facilitator. Participants could comment on each other's contributions. Additionally, we established a WhatsApp group to further enhance interaction among participants and make the learning experience more practical."

Discussion

Research Question 1

What is the impact of taking an online professional development course on teachers?

According to the data collected from the questionnaire and semi structured interviews, the results clearly depict that most of the teachers responded positively regarding the effectiveness of the online professional development course. Quantitative data from the findings demonstrates that 42.42% teachers strongly agreed, and 51.51% agreed, and 6.06% teachers neither agreed nor disagreed that taking an online professional development course had a positive impact, which means that a large number, i.e., approximately 94% of the participants, agreed that an online professional course enhanced their instructional skills, which helped them to adopt effective and engaging teaching methods. Similarly, teachers are of the view that professional development course helped them develop better understanding of teaching grammar communicatively for teaching; the results showed that 51.51% teachers strongly agreed and 42.42% agreed while 6.06% teachers neither agreed nor disagreed with this aspect. It means that a high percentage of the participants reported that the online professional development course enabled them to teach grammar communicatively in terms of learning teaching strategies and pedagogical trends; therefore, this online professional course helped teachers develop their teaching skills, specifically grammar, because different strategies to teach grammar were taught in that course. Furthermore, 51.51% of teachers strongly agreed, and 39.39% agreed, and 6.06% teachers neither agreed nor disagreed that online professional development course enabled them to integrate the activities of professional development course in their context. Regarding this question, almost the same response has been received that is 94% of the participants agreed that they also learned the activities from the course and integrated them in their own teaching context which is very helpful for the teacher's professional growth.

As discussed in the literature review, Silvia (2015) stated that the OPD had a good effect on teachers teaching methods and students' learning. Enhancing the accomplishments and growth of English language students is significantly impacted by the development of English language instructors' teaching abilities and knowledge through online professional development (Guskey, 2000). The question was further discussed in the semi structured interviews, and the teachers talked about the positive impact of the online professional development course. Each teacher presented their own experience about the positive impact of online course on their teaching in terms of developing their skills and addition of knowledge such as different pedagogical skills for teaching grammar communicatively. It has changed their perception regarding online learning and improved their confidence. The participants of this online professional development course reported that the course enabled them to teach grammar effectively.

Research Question 2.

What are teachers' perceptions of their interaction opportunities to create a community of practice?

According to the data collected from both the questionnaire and semi-structured interviews, the results clearly indicate that 27.27% of teachers strongly agreed, while 57.57% agreed, and 9.09% neither agreed nor disagreed that teachers frequently provided comments on peers' reflections and other posts on the discussion board each week. This suggests that nearly half of the participants (57.57%) agreed that engaging in discussions and receiving feedback from peers enhanced their understanding of course concepts, with 27.27% strongly agreeing with this perspective. It highlights the importance of discussion boards in facilitating idea-sharing and feedback.

Additionally, 42.42% of teachers strongly agreed, and 51.51% agreed, while 6.06% neither agreed nor disagreed that sharing comments with peers was beneficial for developing a better understanding of discussion board questions. Similarly, 27.27% of teachers strongly agreed, 57.57% agreed, and 9.09% neither agreed nor disagreed that providing feedback on peers' comments enabled them to reflect on their own ideas. These findings demonstrate that interaction on the discussion board fosters reflection and enhances understanding among participants.

Regarding the use of WhatsApp groups, 51.51% of teachers strongly agreed, 45.45% agreed, and 3.03% neither agreed nor disagreed that it helped them interact with teachers and other participants regarding course activities and challenges regularly. Thus, both discussion boards and WhatsApp groups proved instrumental in

creating a community of practice in the online course, providing opportunities for idea-sharing and deeper understanding of course concepts through interaction with peers and teachers.

As discussed in the literature review, virtual communities often facilitate more introspective and profound online discussions compared to in-person interactions (Prestridge, 2010). The semi-structured interviews further explored participants' experiences with creating a community of practice through interaction. Each teacher shared their own experiences of interacting through platforms like discussion boards and WhatsApp groups, which allowed for meaningful exchanges of thoughts and ideas related to course content. Moreover, providing feedback on peers' comments on the discussion board was highlighted as a valuable practice that enriched participants' learning experiences. The virtual interaction and collaboration among teachers in online professional development are strengthened, as noted in previous studies (Chen, Chen, & Tsai, 2009; Booth & Kellogg, 2015). Furthermore, the concept of a community of practice extends beyond technical knowledge, emphasizing the importance of forming connections over time (Lave and Wenger, 1991) and building communities around shared interests (Wenger, 1998).

Conclusion

In recent years, there has been a notable increase in the uptake of professional development certificates and academic degrees among teachers worldwide, particularly in the realm of virtual language education programs, as reported by Hall and Knox (2009). However, despite this trend, there remains a dearth of research examining the perspectives of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers on online/distance learning professional development courses, particularly in Pakistan. This study aims to bridge this gap by investigating EFL teachers' perceptions of such courses.

The research objectives focused on exploring the impact of online professional development courses on teachers and examining their perceptions of interaction opportunities to foster a community of practice. Understanding teachers' perspectives on these aspects is crucial for enhancing the effectiveness of online professional development initiatives.

The findings of this study suggest that online professional development courses can be beneficial for EFL teachers, with a majority of participants acknowledging their positive impact on teaching practices and professional growth. While a small percentage of participants raised concerns about certain aspects of course content, such as organization and relevance to overall outcomes, interviews revealed overall satisfaction with these aspects.

Moving forward, further research is needed to identify best practices in online professional development for EFL teachers in Pakistan. This will enable educators, researchers, and universities to optimize online learning opportunities and ensure that teachers remain abreast of new developments and strategies in virtual professional development contexts. Moreover, emphasis should be placed on integrating technological aspects of online learning and teaching into professional development courses to enhance teachers' proficiency in this area.

In conclusion, online professional development courses hold promise for EFL teachers, offering valuable opportunities for growth and learning. By addressing the concerns raised and leveraging the benefits identified, these courses can play a vital role in supporting teachers' continuous professional development and enhancing the quality of English language education in Pakistan.

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