The Meaning and Practice of Professionalism of EFL Teachers in the Saudi Context

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Abstract

During the Preparatory Year Program (PYP) year, the English Language Institute (ELI) concentrates on raising the level of English of new students so that they are able to adequately cope with studying in their desired department in the following years. Such a drastic change in the institution's goals has led to some changes in the professional development programme in order to handle these new changes. For the first part of this research study, a review of the past and current research studies on professional development and professional identity issues will be presented. The second part of this paper will report on a small-based inquiry conducted with four (two male and two female) ELI teachers aiming to explore two important and related issues. First, there is the issue concerning the role of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers in planning and structuring the professional development programmes offered by the ELI, while the second looks to examine the professional identity of the teachers as sensed by the teachers themselves. In the third and final section, a reflection on how this inquiry can lead to the awareness of the teachers' role (male and female) in training and professional development programmes as well as professional identity perceived by the teachers, which ultimately, should lead to a much deeper interpretation of the status of the English language teacher profession.

Keywords: English as a Medium of Instruction (EMI), EFL, Preparatory Year Program (PYP), professional development, Saudi Arabia

1. Introduction

The teaching profession is probably considered one of the most contentious and argued about professions today. English as a Foreign Language (EFL) are not exempt from such issue. English is now becoming the lingua franca of the world (Jenkins, 2007) and with the increase of language courses offered at tertiary level institutions around the world coupled with the ever changing educational environments, numerous challenges face the English language teaching profession and thus, the most obvious solution is to regulate the profession in terms of qualifications, experience and awareness of the context-specific needs of the EFL learners (Kasi, 2010).

The EFL profession in Saudi Arabia has witnessed numerous changes in the past five decades (Elyas & Picard, 2018). Challenges relating to the increased number of students' intake, social and economic demands to meet the Saudi Vison 2030 as well as the witnessed, fast global changes in education, transforming education in the twenty-first century for EFL teachers and their students to cope with all the aforementioned changes mandates the incorporation of continuing professional development activities and training for the EFL teachers (Picard, 2018). A discussion of the general pillars of professional development is given in the next six sections.

1.1 Definition(s) of Professional Development

In the literature, Professional Development (PD) is referred to in various ways that are more or less interchangeable. For example, it has been referred to as 'training' (Eun, 2011), 'staff development' (Cobb, 2010), 'in-service teacher education' (Mukuna, 2013), 'professional study' (Roe, 2004) and 'learning journey' (Avalos, 2011; Roberts, 2016). Each term is used in the literature depending on the context where the PD is taking place as well as on the goals that PD seeks to archive and what types of activates are adopted.

Drossel and Eickelmann (2017) perceives PD as a process in which individuals, groups and organisations practice in order to be more efficient and effective. Robottom (1987), on the other hand, defines professional development from a different perspective. He argues that there are two kinds (paradigms) of professional development: one on a personalized level and the other on an institutional level. He explains that the former

includes the further pursuit of professional study according to the specific individual needs of the teachers, while the latter is the staff development approach in which professional development is tailored to fit solely the needs of the institution. Richards and Farrell (2005) view PD by stating that teachers' development concerns long-term goals that are not job-oriented. While Lange (1990) states that teachers' development is a: "process of continual intellectual, experiential, and attitudinal growth of teachers [...] both before and throughout a career" (p. 250). Calderhead and Shorrock (2003) also mention the institution when defining professional development as they argue that PD can be perceived as an activity of improving the personal as well as professional qualities of the teachers via PD of the faculty and staff in an institution. Additionally, to consider PD event a successful one, it should include the need to develop the teachers to ensure their own professional growth as well as to improve the performance of the school as a whole. Their definition aligns well with Kent (2004) definition since they both identify the need to address specific needs of teachers' in addition to institutional needs.

1.2 Importance of Professional Development

The fact that language teachers are always in need of regular opportunities for professional development is a statement that is widely accepted (Johnson & Golombek, 2016) and one of the approaches to fulfilling this need is through in-service professional development programmes. The need for on-going in-service PD is considered beneficial for language teachers for several reasons. First, not all the pre-service training programmes are capable of covering all the necessary skills and techniques that the ELT teachers in the classroom require (Hiramatsu, 2005) and second, teachers tend to become out of reach of the current research and findings in the ELT field after teaching for a long time (Yuan, Sun, & Teng, 2016). In addition to the previous two reasons, in-service PD can help teachers gain the necessary knowledge, which will enable them to adapt the role of 'agents of change' in their insinuations (Watson, 2014). Becoming agents of change at KAU is a necessary goal for ELI teachers especially after the recent change in the University as several scientific departments started introducing English as the medium of instruction when teaching. Finally, it gives teachers the chance to compare and share experiences with other colleagues in the same field of ELT (Guefrachi & Troudi, 2000). Although Armour and Yelling (2004) argue that when it comes to teachers, their career and professional development can be haphazard, however, it could be argued that if an institution supports and encourages their teachers' attendance of such programmes, this will benefit teachers and the institutions they work for in many different ways. For instance, teachers will be able to keep up-to-date with the current trends in the EFL area in addition to being exposed to various techniques in teaching (Shawer, 2010). It should also make them able to deal with different problems emerging in their classrooms (Doqaruni, Ghonsooly, & Pishghadam, 2018; J. Wu & Y. Wu, 2014). Siedow (1985) (as cited in O'Brien, 2004) state that when designing such a programme for any institution, the following six aspects should be taken into consideration:

- Addressing staff needs.
- Specifying in-service objectives
- Planning the content
- Choosing methods of presentation
- Evaluating the in-service programme
- Giving reinforcement and assistance

To explain, such a comprehensive type model begins with placing some importance on the teachers' needs when designing in-service teacher education programmes. This need is then used to develop objectives for the programme and then the way these objectives are presented is decided according to the content of the programme. All of this is then evaluated and support and reinforcement is to be allocated where needed, leading us back to the needs of the teachers and so on. The above six steps are all important when designing in-service professional development programmes for teachers, however, professional development is not limited to attending workshops, lectures and conferences. The literature provides many alternative professional development options.

1.3 Professional Development & the History of Professionalism

In the past, PD for teachers did not receive the same amount of attention received by pre-service training for teachers. In the late nineties, Day and Sachs (2004) states that there was little attempt in most European countries to support the continuous professional development (CPD) of teachers and the most effort was allocated on initial teacher training. For example, in service training or CPD it is voluntary in Austria, while it was not coordinated in Denmark, Italy and Spain. In addition, it was not being conceptualized in France, Belgium and Netherlands (Sanders & Horn, 1994). According to and the *European Yearbook of Comparative Studies in*

Teacher Education, the CPD courses were also short and top-down in both Portugal and the United Kingdom. Osborn (2004) divides professional development into three generations as shown in the following table:

Table 1. Generations of professional development

Generation	First	Second	Third
Stereotype Characteristics	work ignored	work perceived	work embedded
Purpose	to formerly 'dump' predetermined information into the individual regardless of personal or organizational needs	to instigate and direct professional growth with the intention of transforming or reforming the performance of individuals and their organizations	to encourage and support the self-directed transformation or reforming of the individual and organizational performance in relation to personal needs and the mission of the organization

Osborn (2004) argues that in the first generation of professional development, courses and programmes are usually prepared and designed in isolation of the individual needs of the participants or the participant's organization and criticizes the first-generation professional development as a rigid perspective curriculum with very limited room flexibility in order to accommodate the individual needs. However, with the arrival of the socio-cultural theory-- where learning for students is contextualized, and in order to accommodate this new pedagogy in learning, the second generation of professional development started addressing this complexity when preparing professional development programmes for educators and teachers (Lantolf, Thorne, & Poehner, 2015). Finally, Voogt et al. (2015) establishes that the third-generation's focus is on professional development for both the teachers' and institutions' needs. Hargreaves (2000), on the other hand, divides the history of professionalism differently; the following table illustrates his divisions:

Table 2. Ages of professionalism

Generation	Pre-professional Age	Age of Autonomous Professionalism	Age of Collegial Professionalism	Post-Professionalism or Postmodern
Purpose	In this age, teaching was technically simple. Once an individual has learned to master it, they will need no more help after that point.	In this age, teachers were enjoying unprecedented autonomy over all aspects of their teaching.	In this age, teachers started turning to each other for professional learning and support and for a sense of direction.	In this age, teacher professionalism is degrading and will become diminished or abandoned.

1.4 Teachers' Identity & Professionalism

After discussing the generations of Professional Development and ages of Professionalism, attention will turn to teachers' identity and Professionalism. Identity can be defined as who or what someone is, the meaning that people attach to themselves or the meaning attributed by others to them (Beijaard, 1995). According to Jensen (2017), this identity is continually changing and re-changing as people develop over time and interact with other people. Back in the pre-professionalism age (when the TESOL profession started), English teachers were considered 'technicians' who just needed to learn the correct way to teach, but over time, classroom research gained more importance and researchers started recognizing the vital role of the teacher and his/her beliefs (Ngefac, 2008). This led to the recognition that decisions made by the teacher in the classroom were not simply informed by the techniques and methods teachers hold, but rather by a more complex operation where teachers' identity plays an important role (Varghese et al., 2005). Although there is still a debate on whether teachers are considered professionals or not, for the sake of this paper (and my personal beliefs), teachers will be considered as professionals. Freidson (2001) defines professionalism from an institutional point of view as: "a set of institutions which permit the members of an occupation to make a living while controlling their own work" (p.

12). Therefore, being a professional is not only about the expected image the workplace or the institution perceives what the teacher should know and do, but also what the teachers themselves believe to be important to their careers as teachers based on their work experience and personal backgrounds (Biesta, 2015). Sachs (2016) joins aspects from 'teacher identity' and 'professionalism' to establish two modules of professionalism, which he calls 'Democratic Professionalism' and 'Managerial Professionalism'. The former is established as teachers and other professionals in an institution interact with each other and form an identity together rather than individualism, while the latter comes from 'managerialism' where institutions are mainly focused on holding teachers accountable for their actions and their effectiveness is consequently under observation by the administration. Thus, in this latter sense of professionalism, the teachers' main goal is to be effective and efficient in meeting the criteria set by the institution (Sachs, 2016). This study argues that both modules of PD are important because teachers need the sense to feel professional in order to be motivated and enthusiastic to teach. So, feeling like professional and acting like one are both important to form the Democratic Professionalism model. This sense of professional identity will: "strongly determine the way teachers teach, the way they develop as teachers, and their attitudes towards educational change" (Beijaard, Meijer, & Verloop, 2004, p. 108). This paper also advocates the need for teachers to establish new professional identities in the order to reclaim ownership of their profession. Forde, McMahon, McPhee, and Patrick (2006) argue that teachers have lost the ownership of their profession clarifying that currently teachers are obliged to follow an 'intensive set of controls', such as control over curriculum, teaching methods, and institutional pre-determined outcomes and targets. He also clarifies that if the teachers do not reclaim their professionalism, sadly it will then continue to be determined for them by policymakers in institutions.

1.5 Needs Analysis

According to Richards and Schmidt (2002), needs analysis is "the process of determining the needs for which a learner or group of learners requires a language and arranging the needs according to priorities" (p. 353). It could be generally agreed that the 'Needs Analysis stage' is important in any decision-making process. However, according to Davies et al. (2014), this stage is of great importance especially when designing PD programmes for teachers as it is where different group and individual needs are addressed in order to gain real institutional improvements derived from the PD programmes available for teachers. As seen earlier in the literature, some researchers consider needs analysis the first step institutions should implement when designing professional development programmes (Siedow, 1985 as cited in O'Brien, 2004) because when the needs analysis stage is conducted properly, Jhurree (2005) advocates that it will help in developing the confidence of teachers; however, if they are poorly structured with no consideration for the teachers' needs, they tend not to affect the teachers although sometimes they could have detrimental effects on the professional roles of teachers. According to Kelly and Williamson (2002) research, if the PD programmes have a curriculum that is specifically designed to meet the teachers' needs, it is very likely that the teachers' motivation and enthusiasm to the program will also increase. Therefore, in order to form a beneficial and effective professional development programme, the needs analysis stage is required prior to designing the programme. Throughout the literature, 'needs analysis' has proven to be a powerful tool to determine and clarify true needs thereby playing a significant role in enabling educators and practitioners to develop a suitable professional development programme for any institution (Czerniawski, Guberman, & MacPhail, 2017).

1.6 Top-Down Professional Development

When the Needs Analysis is not conducted properly or ignored completely as explained in the previous section, then this is perceived by experts as a top-down PD approach. (Farrell, 2013) states that:

Many times, the teachers who are in the front lines of these institutions have not been consulted and as a result do not have any real commitment beyond attending. This type of professional development has often been called top-down professional development because it comes from above by the administrator, and its opposite if bottom-up professional development (p. 17).

Despite the fact that Osborn (2004) states that: "academics' professional needs cannot always be met effectively on a collective or genetic basis", she still believes that a negotiation channel should be established between the academics and their institutions in order to promote their professional growth as well as addressing their academic individual needs via professional development opportunities. As such, the process is reversed, and the professional development needs of the teachers are negotiated via a bottom-up PD approach rather than top-down PD approach. Carpenter and Krutka (2015) state that: "Traditional, top-down professional development (PD) can render teachers mere implementers of the ideas of others" (p. 707). In the past two decades, institutions and educational establishments have been moving away from the top down PD approach to

a more, practical and contextual, bottom-up approach (Hodgson & Spours, 2015; Jones & Patton, 2018). This is a chance to move away from a stagnant "one size fits all" PD approach (top down) to a more resilient and flexible approach (bottom up) which attends to the needs of the institution, the teachers as well as the students (Macias, 2017).

2. PD: A Small Research Inquiry

In order to gain an in-depth insight to the actual teachers' role in the programmes provided by the ELI for teacher development, I interviewed four teachers from my workplace who are currently teaching in the institution (two male teachers: MT1 and MT2 and two female teachers: FT1 and FT2). Semi-structured interviews were utilised with the participants so as to allow them a room to interact more freely with the researcher (Wengraf, 2001). The interviews were conducted using phone calls since there were geographical and logistical issues in conducting one to one interviews. Each of these interviews lasted about 30 minutes. Teachers who have served the ELI for over six years were chosen since those teachers had more experience and insights about the professional development processes at the ELI. All my participants had some experience with in-service training within the ELI. In order to investigate and find out the teachers' exact role within the professional development programmes available at the ELI, the following questions were presented to the participants:

1) *In your opinion and as an English language teacher, what is the best approach to professionally develop yourself?*

2) *Are you part of any committee in charge of preparing professional development programmes which the ELI offers to its teachers?*

3) *Are you involved in any part of structuring the professional development programmes offered by the ELI?*

4) *Do you perceive yourself as a professional? Do you think the ELI recognizes you as one?*

The interviews were conducted in Arabic and then translated to English then transcribed. Then, by analysing the transcribed data, several emerging themes were identified including: job satisfaction, students and teachers with low motivation and the absence of teachers' voice in the PD programmes structuring. However, for the purpose of this research study, the four major emerging themes will be covered since these themes occurred the most. These themes are: (1) The perception of the teachers' role in the structuring and design of the PD programmes available by the ELI, (2) teachers' negative attitudes towards the professional development programmes offered by the ELI, (3) the Issue of compulsive participation in PD programmes, and (4) teachers' Professional Identity.

2.1 Teachers' Understanding of Professional Development

As per the transcribed data, it can be seen that the four participants stated that they are always working towards developing themselves and how PD is an important pillar for the advancement of their career. This is evident from FT1 as she states:

"As a teacher in the EIL, I think that professional development is a very important part of my career. I believe that if I do not develop myself, I would be left behind and would not know the latest English language teaching methodologies ... I develop myself professionally by attending conferences whenever I can in addition to attending the professional development courses offered by the ELI".

When asked if she professionally developed herself in any other way, she replied:

"No, I think this is it ... attending conferences and lectures is my way of professionally developing myself ... sometimes I also use the internet to find some material for my classes".

MT1 was also asked how he develops himself professionally and he replied:

"I try to attend conferences like TESOL Arabia whenever I can... however, it's very difficult due to the fact that we need to take time off of work... this is not always granted by the administration in the ELI".

Furthermore, MT2 clarified that for him attending conferences and workshops conducted by the ELI is how he develops himself professionally in addition to getting his master's degree from a British university two years ago.

2.2 Teachers' Role in the PD Programmes in the ELI

Another major theme that emerged from the data was that the teachers believed they had no say in the planning and structuring of the PD programmes which were presented to them. MT2 stated that

"We don't have an opinion on what is presented in the professional development offered by the ELI... During last year, we only had one course for three days... the content was already decided by the administration in the ELI

as all the teachers got only a memorandum in our pigeonholes telling us to attend the sessions".

FT1 also reiterated this point by saying that

"Unfortunately, teachers in the ELI don't have any saying in the professional development material available to them ... I believe that the administration should consider the teachers' needs before organizing any of their professional development courses... Honestly speaking, if the teachers are not interested in what is presented, then they will not pay any attention or even not attend at all".

2.3 Attendance at Professional Development Programmes

The data showed that three out of the four teachers I interviewed were not happy about the attendance of professional development programmes organized by the ELI being mandatory, which the following quotes illustrate:

"I think attending should be optional... after all it's a professional development course... teachers should want to come to this event not be ordered to attend it" (FT2)

"Of course, it shouldn't be mandatory ...Can you believe they were even taking attendance?!... They made us- the teachers- sign an attendance sheet ... I mean we are professionals we are not a group of kids!" (MT2)

"It's a professional development, it should be optional... if the teachers are not attending willingly... I don't believe they will benefit from the attendance" (MT1)

Only one teacher- FT1- supported the mandatory attendance:

"If it was not mandatory, believe me nobody will attend... I mean teachers are already always complaining of the long working hours... any additional sessions such as professional development... would be easily dropped by them".

2.4 Professional Identity of the Teachers

The participating teachers indicated clearly in the interviews, that they understood the meaning as well as the importance to be a professional. All the participants gave a general perception of what is meant by being a professional which they interpreted it as having what it takes to successfully complete certain tasks been asked of them.

The lady teacher FT1 expressed this concept by emphasising the fact that she is a professional and her highest qualification, MA in Teaching English from an American university, consolidates her claim that she is a professional. Additionally, she further added that she has taught for over six years. However, she voiced her concerns regarding what she believed as the lack of being seen as an expert professional in the field:

"I don't think they consider we have the necessary knowledge to continue in our jobs without continuously monitoring and watching every step we make... It has reached a stage where they would send teachers that are not qualified - I mean without a master's degree sometimes- to monitor and evaluate our classes!... I don't think any university in the world would do that".

The same attitude to the institution's treatment of teachers' PD was held by another teacher (MT2), who stated that

"*The ELI treats all the teachers the same way; it doesn't matter how professional you are or what degree you hold... Can you believe that at one stage they wanted teachers to take the TOFEL exam?!"*

And when he was asked why this happened, he said:

"*I think it is because we had teachers who were not qualified for the job and they wanted to lay them off, so they needed a reason ... still that's unprofessional and does not justify what they wanted to do*".

Participants also indicated that they were not treated as professionals when it comes to the salary. This issue was raised by two of the participants FT2 and MT1 indicating that teachers in the ELI are paid less money than any other State University in the Gulf region. MT1 stated that he feels like an underpaid factory worker and if the ELI treated them as professionals, they would not be working a huge number of hours and some weekends with this kind of salary.

After examining the emergent themes, analysis of the data from this small inquiry yielded four main findings. I will be presenting these findings for this study as follows:

Finding 1: Although teachers at the ELI valued PD, they had a narrow understanding of it

Finding 2: There was a lack of teachers' role in PD Programmes at the ELI

Finding 3: Teachers disliked the compulsory attendance aspect of PD programmes run by the ELI

Finding 4: Teachers perceived themselves as professionals, but believed they were viewed or treated as such by the ELI

3. Discussion of Findings

From the teachers' statements presented in the previous section, it can be clearly seen that they fully appreciated the importance of professional development; however, their perceptions of PD practices seem to be restricted to participating and attending conferences, PD workshops, online research, or pursuing a higher (postgraduate) degree. The literature on PD consider this view to be inadequate as there are undoubtedly numerous possibilities and opportunities for teachers to develop themselves professionally including the opportunity of having a peer observation and action research to mention a few. This research study argues that such practices of PD are crucial and thus, should be focussed upon where the teachers are involved in them at the ELI in order to expand their knowledge base of learning the different opportunities of PD that can be taken advantage of.

Additionally, the analysis of the gathered data also indicated that the ELI may not have adequately addressed the needs of the teachers during the structuring and delivery of the PD sessions, which gave an indication that there is still a remnant of a top-down PD approach. Thus, by not involving the teachers in the PD programmes structuring and design, it denied the teachers the chance to have any important input with regards to the actual structure and content, as well as the timing of those PD sessions.

Glover and Law (2005) believe that addressing the professional needs of teachers are crucial in the planning and structuring of PD programmes. This is corroborated by the study of Bayar (2014) who acknowledges that meeting the needs of the teachers is one of the key elements in having a successful PD programmes. Furthermore, all the teachers stated that they were not consulted, via any surveys or otherwise, prior to the commencement of PD sessions delivered by the ELI which may suggest that the teachers perceived that the institution was placing its priorities and needs before those of the teachers. It could be argued that it is sometimes difficult if not unrealistic to address the needs of every single teacher (either on a collective or generic basis) in a large institution; however, researchers such as Osborn (2004) affirms that prior consultations should be held with the teachers so that both, the needs of the teachers as well as the institution are equally addressed.

The literature also indicates the fact that when the needs of the teachers are sufficiently addressed as well as their expertise in many aspects of the teaching profession, such as their existing knowledge and many years of experience as teachers, their input will certainly help in tailoring the most beneficial PD programmes for the teachers (Starkey et al., 2009). The analysis of the data also indicates that the teachers believed that the ELI should not give the same consideration to all teachers when it comes to design and delivery of the various professional development programs. As such, this study contends those teachers who have the most experience and knowledge should be afforded a special consideration and more involvement in the structuring of PD programs at the ELI. Several researchers are in support of this notion where the educational institution can largely benefit from such experienced and knowledgeable teachers by allowing them to share their input in the structuring of the teacher PD programs (Johnson & Golombek, 2016; Watson, 2014).

Mandatory attendance for PD sessions offered by the ELI is an idea supported in the literature by Clement and Vandenberghe (2000) as they state that institutions usually follow a professional development approach that is a top-down in nature with the purpose of pressuring their teachers to meet their institutional targets. As evident from the data in this research, three of the participants reject this notion adopted by the institution, while only one of them supported this approach. This study argues (from the participants' points of view) that PD courses/sessions should always be made mandatory. If the session/course recommends that certain changes to the syllabus or the methodology required by the institution should take place, then making such courses/sessions mandatory, can be accepted. However, if the session/course is suggesting or advising an additional or extra practice ideas and recommendations to the teachers, then it will make more sense if the attendance is optional.

Furthermore, the qualitative data analysis highlighted the fact that the participating teachers believed that they are professionals however; some participants indicated that the ELI may have treated differently one way or another. The participants voiced their concerns regarding certain issues which they believed should be given lengthy reviews and considerations such as teacher monitoring, teacher evaluation, teachers' workloads and working hours, in addition to remuneration issues which were instances that made them feel as if they were no appreciated as professionals.

In conclusion, the study recommends that it is crucial for the ELI to review the issues which the teachers voiced their concerns on as soon as they emerge. Not dealing with those issues would result in teachers' feeling

underappreciated and unsatisfied, which will undoubtedly have an effect on their overall sense of professional identity and their overall PD aspirations and as a result, also affecting the teaching quality level at the institution. Moreover, assuming that those problems would disappear or are solved on their own without being addressed is a sure recipe for failure.

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