

Exploring EFL Teachers' Perceptions towards Professional Development: A Case of An Omani University

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Abstract

This study explored how English language teachers at an Omani university viewed professional development (PD). The research study aimed to develop an understanding of the PD these teachers receive and their views regarding their professional development and the challenges they face

during PD. The study adopted an interpretive approach to understanding the current situation of six teachers working at the English language department (ELD) at one Omani university. The main instrument to collect data was a semi-structured interview adopted based on the previous studies. The sampling method was a convenience sampling as the researchers used their colleagues as the participants of the study. The study's findings revealed that participating teachers were aware of the significance of PD but were disappointed that the voices of teachers were not heard. The results of the study revealed many challenges including lack of autonomy, insufficient time, heavy workloads, unsupportive working environments, and PD activities that were not considered necessary by the participants. The outcomes further revealed that teachers' attitudes remain an overlooked issue within these Omani studies, specifically in ELT/EFL context. Hence, the findings of this study provided a contribution to the body of knowledge on issues related to teacher PD and teachers' attitudes to PD within the ELD teachers' context. The narrow number of teachers participating in the study could be attributed to reluctance of teachers to take part in research and/or a lack of interest in the topic. Therefore more studies can be conducted with a larger sample size.

Key words: Adult learning; PD (professional development); PD challenge; Teachers attitudes

1. Introduction

Teacher professional development has been defined in various ways according to different agencies and individuals. Teachers' PD refers to teachers being involved in the process of improving their skills and competencies, so they can best meet the needs of their students (Hassel, 1999). Hence, it is an opportunity for them to expand their knowledge and skills, cope better with current challenges and meet educational standards. It is, therefore, not shocking to see teachers engaging in different opportunities as they experience PD's impact on their professional growth and student achievement (Macià & García, 2016). In the literature, teachers' PD is defined by Bolam (2000) as a way for teachers to enhance their knowledge and teaching skills and improve the quality of education. Others, like Wise (1989), define professional teachers as those who have a good understanding of their profession and the subjects they teach and are able to remain true to their intellectual disciplinary demands. Wise contends that such teachers understand professional standards and commit to them. His definition (1989) clearly illustrates that becoming a professional teacher is not easy.

Both Clement (2002) and Seifert (1999) support Wise's view and believe becoming a professional teacher is challenging and requires time to master. This reflects the dynamic changing nature, which adds to the complexity and difficulty in finding a definitive term for TPD. As asserted by Cunningham (2008), a precise definition from literature is "almost entirely absent" (p. 124), and even those instances that do exist rarely define what is meant by the term.

Actually teachers' professional development is a process that focuses on learning experiences that are essentially needed to enhance teachers' knowledge and instructional practices. As a result, learning professionals seek such learning opportunities that extend their professional knowledge and skill set beyond those they already possess (Cunningham, 2008). Therefore, it is expected that opportunities for PD will be sought out by the teachers.

1.1. Adult learning theories

According to Terehoff (2002), offering effective PD for adults requires acknowledging their nature as adult learners. Hence, valuing their professional backgrounds, experience, and developmental growth. He argues that when planning PD activities, PD providers often assume

that PD learning strategies and methods should mirror what teachers employ with their students. This suggests that adults are offered PD learning strategies that are based on pedagogy, the art of teaching children. In general, teachers, as adult learners, have a lot of responsibilities and they are involved in many activities; therefore they understand that they need to take responsibility for their learning. Thus, it is critical to ensure that their views are heard within the learning environment, as well as to question institutional policies, structures, and practices in order to support the unique adult learners' learning experiences (Merrill, 2004). Considering aspects of adult learning would be helpful within teachers' professional development as mentioned by McQuiggan (2007), who stresses that adult learning should be based on teachers' prior experiences, and professional development activities should be designed around these experiences. This highlights the importance of adult learning theory in teachers' professional development, as well as the application of its functional principles, implementation, and strategies to teachers' professional development activities. Hence, theories and principles of adult learning can be useful when applied in developing and implementing PD activities. Plus, these principles may help bridge the gap between theory and practice in professional development and its impact on classroom implementation. As a result, this could produce teachers who can rely on their learning experiences to create more helpful learning settings and experiences for students. Furthermore, Boucouvalas and Krupp (1989) stated that by considering components of analogical practice, PD providers could increase the effectiveness of professional development opportunities. Adults who engage in this practice understand why it is important to learn something, how to direct themselves through learning resources, and how to acquire information, knowledge, skills, attitudes, and wisdom.

1.2. PD approaches in Oman universities

Alongside the growing tendency to enhance Omani society's transformation into societal knowledge, especially in the recent years, the Ministry of Higher Education (MHE) has set up various projects and has invested in a variety of initiatives that are aimed at boosting excellence at all of its universities. Its main goal is improving the standard of teaching and learning in all higher education institutions with a view to improving the quality and efficiency of staff members. In addition, universities and faculty members have been encouraged to take advantage of existing PD resources and PD initiatives to enhance and maximize the quality of teaching at these universities. The development of many of these initiatives came as a result of global trends impacting policy reforms around the world and across the educational sector (e.g., development of the NAACA).

2. Literature review

A review of the literature reveals that the term "professional development" appears to be used differently by different educational concepts and traditions. It has often been described in terms of INSET, staff development, career development, human resource development, continuing education, and lifelong learning. A reading of the literature on the meaning of PD shows that the term is associated with different definitions, which appears to be far from unproblematic. On the one hand, Desimone (2009) mentions that these definitions "[cast] a wide net for what might be included as PD" (p. 182).

Aldhafiri (2020) mentions that teachers' PD can be more successful if teachers are dedicated to increasing their skills and competencies and are given a broad selection of learning resources with which to teach their students. Additionally, the learning environment can influence the

effectiveness or deterioration of teacher PD, as well as the quality of learning and teaching performance in these institutions (Hoekstra & Korthagen, 2011; Postholm, 2012).

In fact, some scholars have proposed that other elements may influence the quality of teachers' PD. For instance, self-evaluation and personal motivation play a central role in teachers' professional growth (Guskey, 2014; Lawrence & Chong, 2010). Others like Eisner (2017) and Al-Qahtani (2015) highlight teachers' voices are important educational resources. In fact, Al-Qahtani, (2015) stresses that when deciding on the essential components of PD, the voices of teachers are crucial since they are not only the ones participating first-hand in these activities, but they are also those accountable for converting this knowledge into successful classroom instruction. Although professional development is still emphasized as important and beneficial by many researchers (Corte et al., 2013; Darling-Hammond & Richardson, 2009; Darling-Hammond, Hyler, & Gardner, 2017), who assert its value in enhancing teachers' knowledge and supporting teachers to increase their students' attitudes toward school learning. Others, on the other hand, stressed the necessity of refocusing research on how teachers learn and the value of what they can contribute and may bring to such a setting (Siko & Hess, 2014).

Researchers who looked into teachers' interest in participating in PD found that teachers' perceptions consistently portrayed a different reality. For instance, some teachers were unsatisfied with the programs, while other teachers criticized the traditional approach of PD and asked for more input and responsibility in directing their PD (Patton, Parker, and Tannehill, 2015; Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, 2014; Smylie, 2014). As described by Guskey (1986), perceptions during staff development are "characterized primarily by disorder, conflict, and criticism" (p. 5). Currently, teacher PD is at crossroads. Professional development is essential for teachers who want to improve their knowledge, skills, and teaching practices (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017; Guskey, 2014). Providing teachers with effective PD activities can help teachers when applying new knowledge to improve their classroom performance and, possibly, enhance the performance of their students. Consequently, possibly increases teaching quality.

However, finding effective and satisfying professional development appears to be difficult. Indeed, many researchers delved into finding effective professional development through the application of specific strategies regarding design and content. However, despite researchers' efforts, two major issues continue to be persistent. First, the design of the PD activity or program. It often reflects the techiest view of PD; specifically, the way information is relayed, which offers little or no impact and lacks efficiency regarding specific teaching and learning issues (Collinson, 2000). The second issue relates to teachers' negative perceptions regarding this traditional PD (Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, 2014; Jacob & McGovern, 2015; Sagir, 2014). Within such traditional PD, teachers' understanding of teaching and learning is ignored. In fact, often in such situations, teachers have been told that others' understanding is more important than theirs. Hence, they are involved in PD that is determined by outside experts, who decide the content and delivery of teachers' professional development (Lieberman, 1995). Therefore, such situations impact their experience, which often turns them into passive learners who can develop negative attitudes that become a barrier to the learning process (Knowles, Holton, & Swanson, 2014). Teachers "are often disappointed with the presenter style and format of the lesson" (Beavers, 2009, p.26).

Research in the field of teacher development and learning suggests that university teachers have the desire and tend to be self-directed learners, who need to control their learning (Knowles, 1975). All of this is significant to ensuring teachers' involvement, as they are likely to resist educational activities if they are positioned in an imposed learning environment.

However, current teacher PD in the context of this study reflects many tenants of traditional PD.

In fact, many researchers described the Omani teacher PD context as centralized flat managerial structure that lacks teachers' autonomy (Alshahrani, 2017; Assalahi, 2016; Shah, 2016). Many scholars highlight that PD that offers teachers the opportunity to research, investigate, reflect and collaborate with others can help in changing their practice (Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin, 2011; Gregson and Sturko, 2007; Lieberman, 1995; Little, 1993). However, the one-size-fits-all PD activities often aim to disseminate new knowledge to teachers in an effort to fix what is broken (Diaz-Maggioli, 2004) and often has little or no impact. Considering adult learning theories and adult learning principles which view teachers as active adult learners, encourage autonomy, focus on needs and motivation, and create a holistic involvement process may be beneficial to teachers (Knowles et al., 2014).

Teachers, as adult learners are not passive as they desire to be responsible for their PD and above all, want to be heard throughout the professional development process (Patton et al., 2015). Thus, the conceptual framework of this study arose from the assumption that professional development may have a beneficial influence on teachers' instruction and perceptions when considered adult learners. According to Ajani (2019), teachers who participate in PD activities are there to learn new knowledge and skills that can help change or enhance their teaching practice. Thus, they are viewed as adult learners by the andragogy theory. According to the assumptions of andragogy, adult learners are independent individuals who can direct their learning, have accumulated experiences that help new learning, have specific learning needs that can impact their dynamic social roles, are problem-centered and interested in immediate application of knowledge, and self-motivated to learn (Knowles, 1975).

Professional development (PD) and its demands have become a global trend in education as it is seen as among the most important factors affecting the quality of the education system and student achievement. Improvements, developmental initiatives, and innovations in different fields have prompted many countries around the world to focus on the improvement of professional competence among citizens to increase their general expertise and promote their ability to deal with significant, emerging fundamental challenges in the world. The education sector was recognized as one of the fields in most critical need of this expertise. Many countries, therefore, started to allocate budgets for executing valuable development programs, and they focused their energy on designing and implementing educational initiatives aimed at creating and providing the best opportunities for learners (Darus, Hassan, Saruwono, Omar, Samad, Muhamad, & Mohammad, 2009).

In this regard, many researchers have found that in the field of teacher education, PD is a significant factor in enhancing the quality of education (Corte, Brok, Kamp, & Bergen, 2013; Darling-Hammond, 2005; Fullan, 2007). According to Allan, Vierimaa, Gainforth, & Côté (2018), PD promotes behaviors aimed at eliciting change in skills, competencies, knowledge, and experience. It is a record of what you have experienced, learned, and then put into practice. It is a fundamental strategy for teacher improvement that encompasses any activity that is intended to bring about positive change in the competency of practicing teachers (Borg, 2018). Darling-Hammond (2003) found that teachers' professional development helps teachers to face the challenges they encounter as it enables teachers to have a proper understanding of their academic materials and provides them with tools and skills needed to improve their students' learning. Hence, PD matters as it allows teachers to expand their knowledge, build on their teaching skills, and enhance their performance and that of their students. Nevertheless,

effective PD and teacher learning, and subsequently, impact on the quality of education, does not naturally happen with the provision of PD opportunities.

PD is no panacea, and there are still gaps in knowledge of what kinds of PD models work best, how much difference PD for classroom teachers makes, and how teaching institutions can maximize the impact. In a profession as complex as teaching, it seems obvious that we should provide teachers with access to professional development that helps them keep improving their practice. However, it is highly important to consider teachers first. Their understanding of PD makes such an approach more productive. Gabriel, Day, & Allington (2011) mention that enabling teachers to express their understanding of PD allows them to share and reflect on their experiences of what they deem useful and effective, which leads teachers to “feeling supported, trusted, and valued as professionals” (p. 40). Otherwise, this might result in teachers’ failure to benefit from PD opportunities (AlShahrani, 2017).

The significance of this study stems from the fact that it is important for teachers to be aware of the importance of PD. It also addresses challenges they identify concerning their PD. This study is also an opportunity to build teachers' confidence and self-esteem and to acknowledge their expertise. Therefore, given the overall importance and value of PD, there is a continual need to research and comprehend how teachers understand PD. Understanding what PD is and what teachers think about it can potentially help in defining what adjustments need to be made to increase its effectiveness. Researchers have advocated the need for future investigations to understand how teachers teach (Kennedy, 2016). In addition, understanding teachers' attitudes and expectations have the potential to impact their behavior which in turn affects their overall PD experience (Belagali, 2011; Hussain, Jamil, Noor, Sibtain, & Shah, 2011; Trivedi, 2012). In fact, Matherson & Windle (2017) argue that researchers are determined to improve professional development but lack the understanding that the learner (i.e. the teacher) is essential. Additionally, there is a need to understand PD that assists teachers as adult learners, both intellectually and emotionally, so they can enhance their knowledge and skills and improve their overall practice. As PD occurs in various contexts worldwide, there is a need to develop an understanding of PD.

The current study aimed to explore ELD teachers’ understanding of the term PD and their attitudes to its challenges. The study aimed to enhance the understanding of PD by identifying how it is viewed by ELD teachers.

Thus, the specific aims and objectives of the study were as follow:

1. To explore ELD teachers’ understanding of the term “professional development” (PD)
2. To identify the perceived challenges driving and enabling, or otherwise limiting and restricting them.

Based on the mentioned objectives, two main questions were set out in this study:

1. How do teachers working at the English Language Department (ELD) at one university in Oman understand the term “professional development”?
2. In the view of these ELD teachers, what is the nature of the challenges that they face in their attempts to engage in professional development?

3. Methodology

As explained earlier, this study aimed to explore the area of PD as perceived by the participants themselves. Using a qualitative research methodology would therefore be best-suited considering the nature of the current study, its research questions, and the philosophical underpinnings. Therefore, the best-suited approach was to establish “channels of conversation and human interaction with actors of this phenomenon” (McQuiggan, 2007, p. 51). As pointed out by Denzin and Lincoln (2011), a qualitative approach is more focused on “the qualities of entities and processes and meanings” rather than on “quantity, amount, intensity, or frequency” (p. 10). Matthew and Sutton (2011) mentioned that when the research questions are open-ended and the researcher needs to gather more information, qualitative research is more appropriate, which was indeed the case in the present study.

Using an interpretive approach was not without its limitations though and likely would raise questions of reliability and internal validity (i.e. it is more prone to researcher errors and biases).

When deciding on data collection methods, the initial plan was to use a questionnaire to gather general information on Omani teachers’ perceptions of PD. However, the questionnaire was excluded from the study. It was designed to target teachers from different Omani universities, both private and government, and within different regions. As such, when reviewing the data collected, it was recognized that such data could be useful when it comes to teachers’ demographic characteristics (i.e. frequency distribution of age, gender, level of education, subject, and years of experience). When it comes to more pressing issues which were the focus of this study, however, such as challenges experienced by teachers, interview was recognized as a better way to collect data. So, teachers at the ELD were contacted again via emails and phones in order to take part in individual interviews. Although potentially many teachers expressed their interest in participating in the interviews, and out of 10, six Omani teachers accepted to participate in the semi-structured interviews. The rationale for selecting the six participants was merely due to the fact that subject selection was based on volunteer participation. Besides, in order to meet the ethical considerations of research, all the participants were pre-informed about the goal of the research and were also asked to state their consent for the publication of the paper elicited based on the research outcomes. The interviews were transcribed then in order to start the coding process. In fact, the main purpose behind using semi-structured interviews was an intention to collect detailed, rich data to find out teachers attitudes towards PD and their perspectives about the challenges they face to regarding the subject matter.

Based on the research aims, the sampling strategy was convenience sampling which is considered a type of nonprobability sampling in which people were sampled because they were convenient sources of data. As asserted by Dornyei (2007), this sample focuses on the target population who meet certain practical criteria such as easy accessibility, availability at a given time, or willingness to be part of the study. Hence, it included accessible teachers from the ELD, those who had the time and were willing to participate. According to Yates, Partridge and Bruce (2012), the convenience sampling approach is a commonly used approach in qualitative research and concerned with selecting “accessible subjects” based on availability, ease, speed, and low cost (Marshall, 1996, p. 523).

Based on the convenience sampling approach outlined above, the recruitment of interview participants was voluntary in nature. Teachers were contacted via email that was circulated among teachers in the ELD, explaining the nature of the study and how they are welcome to participate. The circulated email asked teachers to respond to show whether they were interested in taking part in the interviews. Six Omani teachers agreed to participate in the semi-structured interviews. The limited number could be attributed to reluctance on the part of teachers to take part in research and/or a lack of interest in the topic.

The participants of the study consisted of six English teachers with 3 to 17 years of experience in teaching English as a foreign language in ELD in Oman. The characteristics can be seen in the following table.

Table 1
Academic background of interviewed teachers

No	Pseudonym	Qualification	Experience
1	Noura	Master s degree in TESOL	3
2	Maha	PHD in English language education	17
3	Amnah	Master s degree in applied linguistics	8
4	Muneerah	Master’s degree in English language and TESOL certificate	8
5	Fadwa	Master s degree in English language education	11
6	Sousan	Master s degree in English education	9

The main material which was used in the current study was a researcher-designed interview which was examined through asking two experienced teachers to make sure of validity. Semi-structured interview questions were designed for this study's research questions based on the review of related literature. Hence, focusing on issues regarding ELD teachers' ability to direct their learning, their access to relevant PD aligned to their teaching practice and their involvement in decision-making (See Appendix).

The study was conducted during half of the academic year. At the first six weeks. However, during the last two weeks, as the end of the semester was approaching, the interviews were conducted. During that time, the majority of ELD teachers became busier. Prior to the interviews, the participants were asked to send some information about themselves, around 700 words. The participants were also asked to provide general information regarding their personal lives (i.e. age, marital status), educational background, teaching context, and work experience. Hence, this was aimed at obtaining some insight into how they described themselves and what aspects of their lives and identity they chose to highlight. Plus, it was also planned to use such information as a starting point.

A comfortable and quiet place was chosen to conduct the interview in a friendly and relaxing manner. The interview started with general questions. This is recommended by Stringer (2014), who emphasizes the need to start with general questions that have the potential to elicit information from participants to explain the issue in their own words. Specific questions were

also asked regarding the explored phenomenon to allow teachers to share their views in detail and extend the exploration of their experiences and perspectives. Having a range of questions is necessary and adds value because questions are “triggers that enable participants to explore and describe what is happening on their lives or to reflect on events associated with issues of concerns” (Stringer, 2014, p.107). The interview was conducted with the six available participant.

The interview was conducted in English, and probing questions were used to allow for detailed information, further elaboration, and clarification on issues (see Appendix). Having a pilot interview was useful as it provided a rough idea about how long the interviews would take. The interviewees should be made aware of the duration of the interview when they were invited to participate (Wallace, 2006). Interviewers should realize that agreeing on a specific time means to “stick to it, and not over-run” it (p. 147).

All the interviews were conducted individually, face-to-face, for approximately thirty minutes, which was the previously agreed-upon time frame. Then the interviews were transcribed as soon as possible. In fact transcribing began the day after the interview took place. Finally, each interviewee was provided with a copy of their transcript a week later to check accuracy.

Since the present study was conducted through a qualitative method, the main way to analyze the collected data was coding. I started coding after familiarizing myself with the details by reading the transcripts many times. Creswell (2014) describes coding as “the process of segmenting and labelling text to form descriptions and broad themes in the data” (p. 243). I started, therefore, with the first interview by reading it several times and labelling all text fragments that were significant and relevant to the research topic, making sure to keep the research questions in mind. Subsequently, I did the same with the rest of the interviews.

I must mention, though, that while coding, some data extracts were coded more than once because the researcher “can code individual extracts of data in as many different “themes” as they fit into, so. An extract may be excluded, coded once, or coded many times, as relevant” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 89). All codes were finally summarized in a table using the MAXQDA software and then printed to reduce the number of codes by merging some to delete any redundant ones. Hence, the revised-initial codes were finally ready for the next step.

Using the MAXQDA software facilitated the process, as it was easy to combine numerous codes into relevant ones under a specific theme or subtheme. I started to review themes obtained from the previous step. I made sure to go through all coded extracts to ensure the consistency of the categorization process for codes, themes and subthemes. In other words, all codes and subthemes have been tested for suitability for a specific theme or whether they could be a better fit for other themes. It is worth mentioning that during this step and previous ones, I found myself always going back and reading all of the data to make sure no significant data was lost or excluded. After reviewing all the subthemes and codes within each theme, I started naming themes for the final version.

After deciding on the final themes, I started the stage of “telling the story” (Ryan, 2006, p. 103). In other words, I started my final analysis for the report, which included reporting the findings supported by the most relevant and significant extracts, as evidence supporting such themes and codes, in a coherent way that readers could follow. I decided to present the data based on the research questions. Therefore, all themes were integrated in order to “provide a collective answer to a research question” (Cohen et al., 2017, p. 552).

4. Results

This section attempts to answer the first research question that focuses on teachers' understanding of PD. Teachers interviewed appear to consider PD to be central to their learning. For them, PD was perceived as a lifelong endeavor and an opportunity for learning. Teachers also thought of PD as an activity that is done individually and collaboratively with colleagues to keep them up to date while they reflect on their progress. It was also considered as a process to evaluate one's practice. However, such views were not always so positive, as in some cases, participants thought of PD as a burden to carry. Figure 1 below illustrates theme one, understanding of PD.

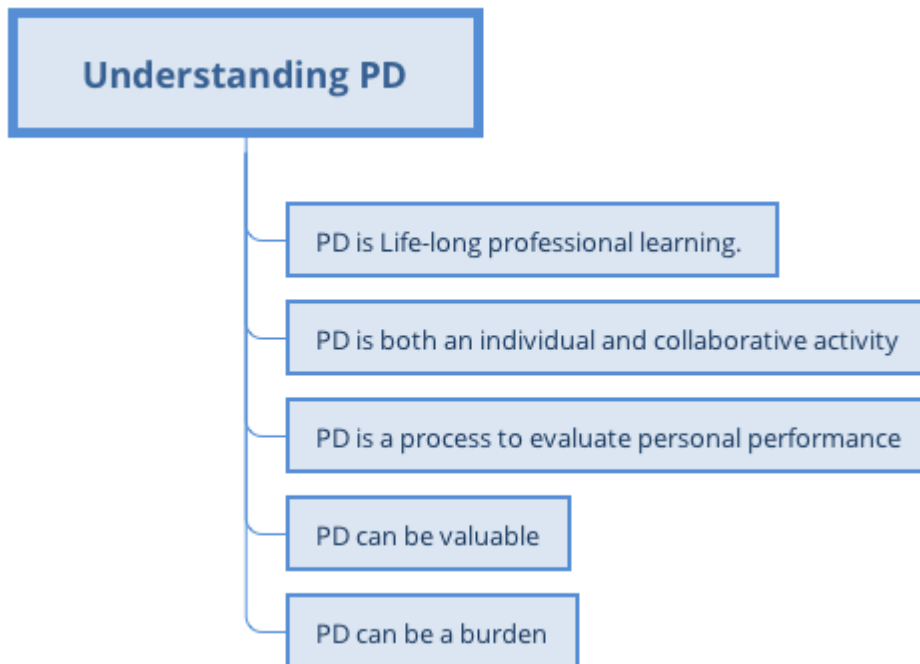


Figure 1. The participants' understanding of PD

There appeared to be a general understanding among teachers interviewed that PD was a form of lifelong learning, which they valued as they believed in its importance and its impact on their teaching practice. Teachers interviewed appeared to consider PD as a form of lifelong learning. Within this view, a number of strong sub-themes emerged, including that PD was a form of learning that allowed professionals to continually develop and excel in their profession. For example, one teacher viewed PD as aiding teachers to: “not only be competent in their profession but also excel in it and be the best they could be” (Muneerah). Others like Maha indicated that PD is intended to build on teachers' skills and update their knowledge by “Improving existing skills and knowledge”. Three teachers also credited PD with enhancing their practice and improving students learning, such as Fadwa, who believed that PD meant:

“Being engaged in learning opportunities on a regular basis in order to grow in your teaching and help your students in reaching their full potential” (Fadwa). Also, teachers' understanding of PD as a form of learning extended to ensuring that professionals were keeping their teaching up to date and enhancing their knowledge and skills to deliver the best learning to their students. In their view, the majority of interviewed teachers believed that PD helped them to keep their teaching current, and this added to its value in ensuring teachers' ability to cope with

educational change. This view was evident in several comments made by teachers when talking about the changing nature of teaching practice, the different curricula, and the individual differences among students. For example, one teacher mentioned that she sometimes saw PD as an opportunity to support teachers in adapting to change and coping with it and “to expand and update your knowledge as a professional so you can better manage changes whether those big educational changes or those you face in your class” (Amnah).

The interviewed teachers seemed to view PD as a way of reflecting on their progress. In their view, PD was a process of evaluating their performance by reflecting on their strengths and weaknesses. Based on that reflection, they worked on improving what they lack and enhancing such weaknesses. Four of the interviewed teachers stressed that they believed that PD could be a powerful tool for them to evaluate their performance in the classroom, skills they needed to improve, how they teach, interact with students and implement skills. For example, one teacher mentioned that being involved in different activities can be “a great way to evaluate your skills and teaching” (Amnah). It could be argued that this was linked to reflective teaching conducted in the classroom, as many teachers revealed that they often thought what they did in their classroom was a part of their development. In fact, as shall be discussed in the next point, two of interviewed teachers mentioned that they never saw the need to engage in PD as they believed what they did and experienced in their classes was enough. Hence, it could be assumed that such views were based on the value that those teachers saw when engaging in reflective teaching. Although four interviewed teachers perceived PD as a great tool to diagnose their progress and reflect on their weaknesses and strength, all of teachers interviewed stressed that it should not be used as an evaluation method by the university management. They revealed that PD should be used by teachers to reflect on themselves, not by the university to threaten teachers.

All teachers interviewed appeared to consider PD to be essential and of great value. This value included knowledge, personal, and future value. They linked the main reason for its value to allowing them to benefit from attending PD activities, expanding their knowledge, and the ability to reflect on their practice. The teachers connected the value and significance of PD to how they saw it as a form of lifelong learning—to enhance their existing skills and acquire new ones—that enabled them to offer the best to their students: “It benefits you by enhancing your knowledge and skills” (Fadwa). It was interesting to see how a few teachers saw personal value related to their sense of achievement and desire to be well-respected in the institution. Plus, it was considered a precious tool as it was regarded as a way to keep building a better career profile.

Those teachers felt they were learning what they needed to do by evaluating and reflecting on their practice, as stated by one teacher: “Sometimes, I wonder what the point is? I mean I feel what I do in my class is really enough. I always reflect on myself, I keep evaluating my work. It isn’t enough?!” (Amnah). She further elaborated that “it is not that I am not interested or don’t want to, it is just that sometimes it’s too much to handle” (Amnah). Other teachers mentioned that they were busy with teaching load and extra work-related issues, and they often believed that attending PD wasted their time, especially when they found themselves in positions where they were forced to attend PD that was not beneficial to their field of teaching or to what they need as teachers. Hence, it could be assumed that being involved in PD sometimes worked against teachers as it wasted their valuable time: “Instead of these time-wasting sessions, we could have worked on something more meaningful and relevant” (Fadwa).

Table 2.

The coding of the collected data through interviews regarding understanding PD

Major themes	themes	Sub-themes	codes
Understanding PD	Lifelong learning		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - continues learning - allows teachers to continually develop - enables teacher to continue to excel in their profession - chance for learning - ensure teacher stay up-to-date in their teaching - build on teachers' skills and update their knowledge - enable teachers to cope with educational change - continues development opportunity
	Both individual and collaborative	individual	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - improves individual skills - personally initiated - personal practice based on each individual needs and interests
		collaborative	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - collaborative - shared practice - shared responsibility
	Evaluative personal performance		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - shows one's progress - offers a reflects on strengths and weaknesses - powerful tool to evaluate performance - Learn about skills requiring improvement.
	valuable	Value to knowledge	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - benefits teachers to improve their knowledge and skills - precious investment to skills - expand on expertise
		Self-value	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Increases teachers confidence - offers a sense of achievement
		Future value	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - build a better career profile
Can be imposed burden		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - waste of time - not worthy - jamming - extra load - forced on them - Caused teachers to fall behind their colleagues. 	

Note. The table above indicates the coding process of analyzing the collected data through the interview. The data were taken from the teachers' answers to the questions focusing on the matter of understanding PD.

Teachers interviewed identified different issues as challenges to their engagement in PD. The following theme, therefore, will provide answers to the second research question, which focuses on challenges experienced by teachers in their attempts to engage in PD. Figure 2 presents the major theme and its subthemes.

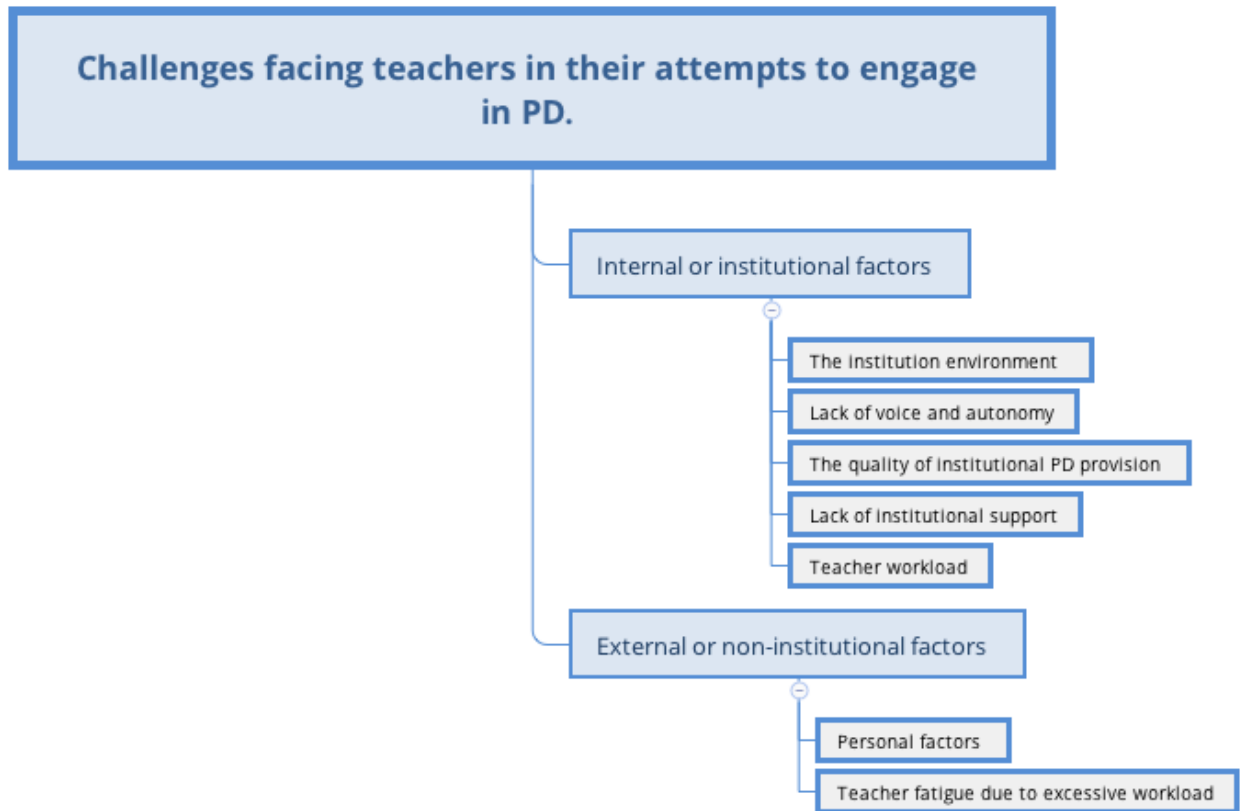


Figure 2. Challenges facing teacher during PD

According to the figure the results of data analysis regarding the second research question of the study, the challenges that the interviewed teachers mentioned can be divided into internal factors and external factors. The internal ones of institutional included environment, lack of autonomy, quality of the PD, and the workload. Also the external or non-institutional factors included personal factors and teachers’ fatigue as a result of excessive workload.

Table 3.
Coding data collected through interview regarding the challenges during PD

Challenges Facing Teachers in Their Attempts to Engage in PD	
The institutional environment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Operates within an inappropriately guided vision. - centralized top-down approach that rarely involves teachers in decision-making - un participatory - not flexible - hierarchical top-down culture
Lack of voice and autonomy.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - rarely had the opportunity to voice concerns - lacked autonomous learning - Felt powerless to discuss professional needs. - feeling controlled and forced to adapt
Quality of PD	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - challenging and impacting teachers’ motivation to engage - Poor quality in content, format, and relevance to teachers’ needs. - lacked follow-up support - Offered generic content rather than specific content.

		- Lacked evaluation practices
Lack of support	of	- Lack of support in offering release time - lack of financial support (funds) - lack of ability to access PD, especially external PD - lack of resources
workload		- put pressure on the teachers - inhibited teachers from engaging with PD - overwhelming responsibilities and duties imposed inhibiting teachers engagement
Personal factor		- family commitments - certain Omani cultural norms
Teacher fatigue		- No desire or motivation to engage in PD activities due to excessive workload - tired and worn-out - impacted physical ability

Note. According to the table above, the challenges that the interviewed teachers mentioned as the difficulties that are facing during PD, can be divided into internal and external factors which are also called institutional and non-institutional factors.

5. Discussion

RQ1: How do teachers working at the English Language Department (ELD) at one university in Oman understand the term “professional development”?

In this study, teachers’ perceptions and understanding of PD resonate with some of the related research particularly those studies that focused on improvement and growth consistently emerging as a key aspect of teachers’ development. Much of the data reported by teachers interviewed in the previous chapter suggested that PD was perceived in two ways: (a) lifelong development and (b) a context-related improvement of skills. Lifelong learning focuses on keeping up to date with new developments in the field through formal and informal learning opportunities that enable teachers to develop their practice and improve students’ performance. It was acknowledged that teachers’ PD was a career-long process (Richter, Kunter, Klusmann, Lüdtke & Baumert, 2014). Teachers in this study appeared to understand PD as a lifelong learning endeavor — an ongoing process for teachers to constantly develop their practice, skills, and knowledge. Experienced teachers highlighted its importance to keep current with new practices, while newly qualified teachers saw PD as an imperative approach to developing their skills as language teachers. As a context-related improvement of skills, PD was perceived as the development of skills that were immediately applicable to the teaching context and that enable teachers to perform effectively within their working environment (Bolam, 2000). Throughout the study, teachers mentioned different PD learning activities that evolved around providing them with useful and appropriate skills and knowledge to be used within the institutional environment.

According to literature reviewing teachers’ understanding of PD was rooted in social construction, which derived their attitudes, choices and positions with regard to their PD. Teachers at the ELD appeared to perceive PD as a process by which they learn context-applicable and appropriate skills. The notion of appropriateness was “based on shared and public value judgments about the needs and best interests of their clients” (Bolam, 2000, p. 272). The teachers further saw PD as an important part of their career development. Teachers interviewed appear to consider PD to be essential and of great value. Some linked the main

reason for its value to keeping professional staff up to date and enhancing their current knowledge, while others found it valuable to strengthen their awareness of effective pedagogical strategies and practice. These benefits were also recognized by many researchers who highlighted that PD was needed to enable teachers to be constantly involved in opportunities that help them improve their professional qualities and keep them up-to-date with the current demands of their profession (Burns and Lawrie, 2015; Evers et al., 2016; Zhao et al., 2019). Moreover, the importance of PD was linked to its essential value in enhancing students' learning (Borko, 2004; Craft, 2002; Desimone et al., 2002; Shaha et al., 2004). Few teachers mentioned that when involved in PD, they found it being effective and hence implemented in their classes, their students found the strategies useful and beneficial to their learning. In addition, some teachers reported a higher level of motivation seen in their students due to PD. These findings were supported by research, which showed that professional development can support teachers increase their students' attitudes toward school teaching (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017). As supported by Doppelt, Schunn, Silk, Mehalik, Reynolds, & Ward (2009), students whose teachers underwent PD performed better and displayed a significantly higher level of achievement compared to those students whose teachers did not undergo PD.

RQ2: In the view of these ELD teachers, what is the nature of the challenges that they face in their attempts to engage in professional development?

The teachers' ability to engage in PD was limited to time availability, which many teachers interviewed reported they lacked. This indication supported research studies conducted by Guskey (2014), Harris et al. (2006), Rogers, Abell, Lannin, Wang, Musikul, Barker, & Dingman (2007), Bani Oraba (2021) and Yamagata-Lynch and Haudenschild (2009), which affirmed that lack of time and a heavy workload were among the most influential factors impacting teachers' interest to PD. It also supported the findings of studies conducted in Oman, which identified lack of time and workload as the main challenges to teachers' engagement in PD (Aldhafiri, 2020; AlShahrani, 2017; Shah, 2016). In turn, this could explain the lost opportunities for teachers to develop their practice, knowledge, and skills as teachers simply could not afford to be part of such opportunities. Plus, the challenges associated with a lack of time and heavy workload could have resulted in a lack of time to process and use the new knowledge, which may explain teachers' inability to use or implement certain PD activities in their classroom teaching practice.

As highlighted by Feiman-Nemser and Remillard (1996), knowledge is suited in practice which required it to be learned in practice; hence, many teachers failed to use the knowledge gained due to an insufficient amount of time to consolidate the new knowledge (Garet et al., 2001; Timperley et al., 2007).

6. Conclusions and implications

Based on previous studies conducted in the Omani context that explored the phenomenon of PD in relation to EFL/ELT teaching, I would argue that most of these studies focused on understanding PD and its impact or focused on evaluating its practices (Aldhafiri, 2020; Al Mutlaq, 2018; Assalahi, 2016; Fareh, 2010). However, teachers' attitudes remain an overlooked issue within these Omani studies, specifically in ELT/EFL context. Hence, the findings of this study provided a contribution to the body of knowledge on issues related to teacher PD and teachers' attitudes to PD within the ELD teachers' context. The findings of this exploratory

study, presented within a detailed description of the ELD context, also offer insights that can be applicable to a broad range of contexts that share similar PD systems.

This is to say that there is still a need for more studies to be conducted to explore this area further and learn more about the impact potentialities and teachers' attitudes. The narrow number of teachers participating in the study and teachers participating in the interviews could be attributed to reluctance on the part of teachers to take part in research and/or a lack of interest in the topic. Therefore more studies can be conducted with a larger sample size. Also this study was limited to female teachers at one university in Jubail city. The limitation of dealing with female teachers alone resulted from the fact that I was only permitted to collect data from the female sector at the university. This is because there is no co-educational system in the Omani context. So gender as a potential effective factor can be taken into account in the future studies.

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Appendix (Interview)

I would like to thank you for taking the time and participating in this study which is scheduled to last about an hour. During the interview, you can always ask for clarification when needed. Also, please note that I will be using an audio recording device to the interview. This will enable me to document exactly what you is represented so I could transcribe the conversation later on. Therefore, I will be asking you to review the transcripts at a later date so that I can make sure I document your thoughts and words exactly as you meant.

The interview questions are the following:

1. In your opinion, what is the professional development, its purpose and how do you perceive it generally in your university?
2. Have you experienced any successful or unsuccessful impact of professional development on your teaching practice? Please provide examples on what you have implemented? Why do you think it had (successful or unsuccessful) impact?
3. Did you experience any difficulties or challenges in relation to your PD?
4. What difficulties can you mention during PD? Please explain in details.