# Next-Gen Teacher Growth: Exploring Online Professional Development

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## Abstract

*The current study explores perceptions and effectiveness of online professional development (OPD) opportunities at higher education institution, thus closing a substantial gap in current literature about the OPD preferences among English as a second language (ESL) lecturers. Professional development is a cornerstone approach to enhancing teacher competence and has gradually moved from traditional face-to-face sessions to online platforms particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic. Although vast research is available on teacher professional development in Malaysia, study into the experiences of language lecturers at higher education institutions with OPD remains scant. This qualitative study which involved seven lecturers from a private university utilized semi-structured interviews to obtain fuller narratives of their perceptions of OPD. In general, findings indicated that although most lecturers had little experience of online professional learning, they held a positive attitude to the possible benefits it could offer. Further analysis identified four major themes for discussion, namely the relevance and effectiveness of OPD, the role of facilitators in enhancing OPD outcomes, the importance of classroom engagement and interaction, as well as professional development effectiveness and growth through OPD. The findings from the study highlighted the usefulness, trials, and room for improvement within OPD programs and suggests that future initiatives should be specifically tailored to consider the ever-evolving needs of diverse groups of teachers in order to maximize the effectiveness of any professional development initiative.*

**Keywords:** *Professional Development, Online, Teaching Profession, Lecturers.*

## Introduction

The landscape of education has undergone significant transformations in recent years, both driven by technological advancements and societal shifts. One of the most notable changes has been the increasing prevalence of online learning, probably the only welcomed outcome of the Pandemic-19, which has permeated various aspects of education, including teachers' professional development (Bragg et al., 2021; Çakiroğlu et al., 2024). As an essential part of this dynamic landscape, teachers need to fit themselves professionally to innovations around them. Professional development (PD) programs offer teachers the opportunity to receive the latest modifications in the teaching practice (Çimer et al., 2010). Teachers may observe changes and requirements in the learning environment and adopt a new philosophy and approach by participating in effective professional development programs. (Çimer et al., 2010; Shahin & Yildrim, 2016). Moreover, the context of professional development has gone through massive transformation (Singh et al., 2024) and appears to be effective when they prompt teachers to question and learn new skills to their teaching practices (Sims et al., 2012). Conversely, teachers are deprived of time, quality education, and appropriate learning environments to develop those skills. Hence, to address these barriers, online professional development (OPD) has emerged as a vital and practical alternative, offering flexible, accessible, and cost-effective solutions tailored to meet the needs of today's educators (Powell & Bodur, 2019).

Online professional development programs provide teachers with the opportunity to enhance their professional skills anytime and anywhere (Heap et al., 2020), bridging the gap created by traditional in-person workshops. These programs integrate modern technologies, such as webinars, virtual classrooms, and self-paced learning modules, allowing teachers to collaborate with internal and external co-workers,

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increased ability to reflect on their practice, increased confidence in their teaching practice, the implementation of teaching practices learnt from OPD and their effect on student outcomes. (Lee et al., 2020). Additionally, online platforms can host resources, facilitate discussions, and offer continuous support, enabling teachers to stay updated with the latest teaching methodologies and innovations (Bragg et al., 2021; Jamil & Hamre, 2018). When well-designed and implemented, OPD not only overcomes logistical and financial barriers but also empowers teachers to take ownership of their professional growth in a way that aligns with the demands of 21st-century education.

## Literature Review

*Teacher Professional Development*

There is a consensus in the literature about the effectiveness of continuing teacher professional development (TPD) in improving the teaching practices, consequently, improving students' outcomes. According to Desimone (2009), many innovations rely on teacher learning and enhanced instruction to increase student learning. Many of a nation's educational reforms are frequently associated with TPD (Singh et al., 2004). In Malaysia, the Malaysian Education Blueprint 2015-2025 have regarded professional development as a top priory if the nation wants to achieve a developed nations' status. The Blueprint, a strategic roadmap for transforming the nation's education system, upholds teacher quality by sternly emphasizing research-informed professional development (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2015).

Professional development (PD) is seen as a critical component of educators' professional skills. As illustrated in Figure 1, professional development is regarded as a personal commitment made by teaching professionals to improve their knowledge, abilities, and competencies over the course of their careers, which directly impacts students learning and students' learning outcome. Upon succession in students' positive achievement, professional development creates a change in teachers' attitudes and beliefs in teaching and learning (Guskey, 2002).

**Figure 1. Professional Development Teacher and Change (Guskey, 2002)**



*Online Professional Development*

Online Professional Development (OPD) refers to online courses, workshops, and learning modules which can be asynchronous, synchronous, or hybrid and it reflects a wide range of purposes, aims, subject areas, pedagogies, and delivery systems (Powell & Bodur, 2019). OPD has grown at such a rapid speed in the last decade that the creation of OPD courses and programs has overtaken the research. The COVID-19 epidemic has accelerated the development, participation in, and demand for online courses and activities (Hartshorne et al., 2020). The fundamental goal of this new pandemic of OPD is to ensure lecturers are provided with the best and precise identification of OPD design, practices, and features (Ferdig et al., 2020) that improve their knowledge and skills.

*Past Studies on Online Teacher Professional Development*

Numerous investigations have been conducted regarding the traditional applications of professional development (PD) within the realm of teacher education research. A significant portion of the literature has concentrated on the professional learning of educators and the efficacy of various PD programs (Gao et al., 2021; Postholm, 2012). Furthermore, prior studies have extensively examined educators' perceptions

of traditional PD and its practical applications (Alzahrani & Althaqafi, 2020; Farrell, 2012). In addition, another segment of research pertaining to professional teacher education has indicated that specific content areas, sustained engagement over time, and adaptive instructional strategies may correlate with the effectiveness of PD initiatives (Lindvall et al., 2022; Desimone & Stuckey, 2014; Amendum & Fitzgerald, 2013; Penuel et al., 2011).

Examining the professional development experiences of educators is essential for assessing the effectiveness and value of such programs (Singh et al., 2024; Luo et al., 2020). However, there has been insufficient focus on teachers' impressions of online PD formats. Parsons et al. (2019) conducted a major study on teachers' impressions of OPD in America. The study included 380 randomly selected elementary, middle, and high school teachers from various majors. According to the poll, the most beneficial effect of teachers' engagement was the availability of online PD at any time. The study also measured teachers' participation in various ways to online professional development and rated their involvement in formal and informal modes.

The literature also includes studies about teachers' needs and preferences for professional development. A notable empirical investigation is the study by Liao et al. (2017), which surveyed K12 teachers regarding their ideal technology, content, and format for professional development across three distinct models: face-to-face, online, and blended. Furthermore, the researchers inquired about the professional development experiences that participants deemed most valuable and essential. The findings revealed a pronounced preference for online professional development formats, attributed to their accessibility, diversity, and interactive features.

Similarly, An (2018) investigated the impact of online professional development courses on K-12 educators' attitudes and behavioral intentions concerning the integration of digital games in classroom settings. The findings indicated significant improvements in the perceptions, self-efficacy, and intentions of American teachers. Similarly, in a separate experimental study conducted in the United States, Healy et al. (2020) assessed the influence of an online professional development course on physical education teachers, concluding that it effectively enhanced their skills and knowledge.

Likewise, Alzahrani and Althaqafi (2020) explored educators' perceptions of the effectiveness of online professional development programs at a university in Saudi Arabia. By employing a survey to collect data, the researchers uncovered some reservations among teachers despite their generally positive attitudes toward online professional development. They highlighted the necessity of considering teachers' needs and priorities when designing these online professional development programs.

*Online Professional Development Insights and Issues*

Thus, OPD is at the heart of such a change to meet the demands of lecturers and help alleviate any difficult conditions that they may have encountered throughout the transition to full-mode online teaching and learning (Al-Bargi, 2021). Besides, various forms of online professional development (OPD) have been explored in academic literature. One notable approach is mobile learning, which utilizes wireless mobile connectivity and devices such as laptops, tablets, and smartphones to facilitate knowledge acquisition. According to Gao et al. (2021), mobile learning offers several benefits, including enhanced accessibility, opportunities for self-directed training, and robust connectivity. In a similar vein, social media has emerged as an informal avenue for knowledge accumulation and serves as a valuable tool for professional development.

While traditional face-to-face professional development (PD) has long been the cornerstone of teacher training, the emergence of online professional development (OPD) has presented new opportunities and challenges (Godsk & Nielsen, 2024; Lay et al., 2020; Singh et al., 2024). Some problems associated with traditional forms include unreasonable costs, teachers' hectic plans, and a lack of expert teacher trainers (Alzahrani & Althaqafi, 2020). Thus, designing and arranging PD in an online form is noticeably worthwhile.

Various studies have revealed several key insights into the effectiveness of OPD for teachers in general. Firstly, studies reported a high level of satisfaction with the flexibility and convenience offered by online PD programs (Smith & Wyness, 2024). The ability to access training materials and participate in activities at their own pace was particularly valued, especially for teachers with busy schedules or limited access to traditional PD opportunities. Secondly, studies found that OPD can be as effective as face-to-face training in terms of improving teacher knowledge and skills. Participants reported significant gains in their understanding of pedagogical approaches, curriculum development, and classroom management (Czerniawski et al., 2021; Lay et al., 2020). Moreover, OPD programs often incorporate interactive elements, such as virtual workshops and online discussions, which can foster collaboration and promote critical thinking among teachers (Smith & Gillespie, 2023).

However, studies also highlighted some challenges associated with OPD. Some teachers expressed concerns about the lack of face-to-face interaction, which can limit opportunities for networking and building relationships with colleagues (Flowers et al., 2024). Additionally, technical difficulties and limited access to technology can pose barriers to participation, particularly in rural or disadvantaged areas (Yurkofsky et al., 2019).

*Theoretical Background*

Numerous scholars consider Mezirow's (1991) Transformational Learning Theory as a foundational framework for teacher professional development (Fleming, 2018; Ghamrawi et al., 2024; Nolan & Molla, 2021; Slavich & Zimbardo, 2012). This theory posits that transformative learning is characterized by deep, experiential learning or life-altering events that can occur within the classroom context (DeAngelis, 2022). To initiate this transformative process, teachers must encounter a disorienting dilemma that prompts them to critically examine their teaching approaches, values, beliefs, and assumptions. This critical reflection enables them to reconceptualize these elements on cognitive, psychological, or behavioral levels (Christie et al., 2018). As a result, teachers can refine their professional practices, enhance their analytical skills, and develop a more nuanced understanding of their experiences (Behroozi & Osam, 2021). The imposition of lockdown restrictions and the subsequent shift to full-mode online delivery presented a significant disorienting dilemma for educators. The challenging situation necessitated a critical re-evaluation of teaching practices and a concerted effort to acquire new knowledge and skills through PD and CPD to adapt to the new online paradigm.

Mezirow's Transformative Learning Theory suggests that learning is a process of significant change, often triggered by a disorienting dilemma. This theory is particularly relevant to online professional development because it provides a framework for understanding how educators can adapt to new challenges and innovate their teaching practices. The key concepts of transformative learning include disorienting dilemma as a challenging situation that forces individuals to question their existing beliefs and assumptions; critical reflection as a process of examining one's experiences, beliefs, and values to gain deeper understanding; and transformative learning as a profound shift in perspective that leads to changes in behavior and worldview. The shift to online teaching during the pandemic can be considered a significant disorienting dilemma for many teachers. To navigate this challenge effectively, they need to:

- Critically Reflect: Examine their existing teaching practices and identify areas for improvement.

- Acquire New Knowledge and Skills: Engage in professional development activities to learn new technologies and pedagogical approaches.

- Transform Their Practice: Implement new strategies and approaches in their online teaching.

Figure 2 presents the 10 phases of the transformational learning cycle as described by Mezirow (1991).

**Figure 2. Transformative Learning Cycle (Mezirow, 1991)**



*Purpose of the Study*

With the above in view, it is obvious that there has been an increasing attention on OPD in teacher education. Having said that, most studies, however, were sampled on the population of teachers from schools rather than specific academics from the higher education industry. Since the implementation of Malaysian Education Blueprint 2015-2025 (Ministry of Education, 2015), emphasis on specialized teacher professional development has been critical, including the need for more in-depth investigations into the perspectives and preferences of language teachers on professional development. While research has demonstrated the potential benefits of OPD, such as flexibility and accessibility, there is a need for more rigorous investigations to determine its impact on teacher knowledge, skills, and practices.

This paper aimed to contribute to the ongoing discourse on teacher professional development by examining the potential of OPD to meet the evolving needs of teachers at the higher education level. This research was designed based on the following research questions:

- What are ESL lecturers' perceptions of online professional development compared to traditional PD?

- To what extent do the online professional development programmes enhance ESL lecturers' classroom teaching practices?

The research insights seek to inform policymakers, educators, and researchers on the potential of OPD to transform today's teaching profession.

## Methodology

*Research Design*

The present study utilises a qualitative research methodology, specifically the phenomenological qualitative research design using open-ended interviews to investigate the perspectives of ESL lecturers regarding the efficacy of online professional development programs. Crewell & Creswell (2018) advocate that phenomenological studies have "strong philosophical underpinnings" as the aim is to represent the experiences and perceptions of the participants stemming from their experiences.

*Research Population*

The research population are English as Second Language (ESL) lecturers working at a private international university in Malaysia. Since this study intends to explore the view of ESL lecturers on their online professional development, purposive sampling was applied. From the total population of 32 ESL lecturers at a private international university, only seven lecturers fulfilled the criteria of having both, more than five years of teaching experience at the university level and having participated between 3 to 5 online professional development programs in the past three years. Purposive sampling enabled researchers to target individuals who met specific criteria crucial to the study, ensuring that the sample was both appropriate and informative (Crewell, 2007,2014). The respondents' demographic information is summarised in Table 1 below.

**Table 1. Respondents' Demographic Information**

| Name | Academic Background | Teaching Experience | Number of OPD* completed |
|---|---|---|---|
| Respondent 1 | Masters in English Language studies from UPM, currently doing PhD in Applied Linguistics | 10 years | 3 |
| Respondent 2 | Basic degree in teaching English as a second language and Master's degree in English | 27 years | 3 |
| Respondent 3 | Bachelors of Languages and Linguistics, majored in English, Masters of Linguistics (incomplete) | 13 years | 2 |
| Respondent 4 | Master's degree | 9 years | 2 |
| Respondent 5 | Bachelors of Languages and Linguistics from University of Malaya and Masters of Linguistics (incomplete) | 13 years | 3 |
| Respondent 6 | Master's degree and PhD | 17 years | 2 |
| Respondent 7 | BA in English and Master's in education (TESOL) | 10-11 years | 2 |

*OPD =Online Professional Development

*Research Instrument*

For this study, the researchers designed the interview guide based on the existing gaps found in past studies on online professional development among ESL lecturers at the university. A self-constructed interview guide was designed to include five carefully structured questions focusing on exploring participants' perceptions of online professional development compared to traditional PD and the extent to which online professional development programmes enhance ESL lecturers' classroom teaching practices. To ensure the trustworthiness of data obtained from the interviews, the self-developed interview guide was reviewed by two subject-matter experts (SMEs) and an inter-rater reliability test carried out which resulted in Kappa agreement of 0.69 indicating the instrument achieved substantial agreement (McHugh, 2012), hence ensuring instrument reliability.

*Research Process*

The interviews, with a duration of around 30 minutes each, aimed to offer more profound understanding of lecturers' experiences and perspectives. Each interview continued until a point of saturation was achieved, therefore assuring a comprehensive investigation of the subject matter. The establishment of a standardised interview procedure facilitated uniformity, while the ability to delve deeper guaranteed the acquisition of comprehensive qualitative data (Jong & Jung, 2015). The interviews were conducted face-to-

face, and all consent matters were agreed prior the interview. The researchers ensured that confidentiality, specifically all participants' personal information will be protected, and no names will be mentioned. All data used for any publication will remain anonymous.

*Data Analysis*

To bolster credibility and dependability, the interview sessions were recorded in an audio format, transcribed verbatim, and further examined using thematic analysis. Thematic analysis enabled the careful discovery of recurring patterns and shared themes within the data, which was methodically coded and analyzed (Jiménez & Orozco, 2021).

## Findings and Discussions

The subsequent section presents the findings obtained from the interviews, followed by a discussion of each theme that emerged from the data analysis. Four developed themes provide valuable insights into the relevance and effectiveness of OPD, facilitator roles in enhancing the effectiveness of OPD, roles of classroom engagement and interaction, and ESL lecturers' classroom teaching practices (Figure 3)

**Figure 3. Emerging Themes**
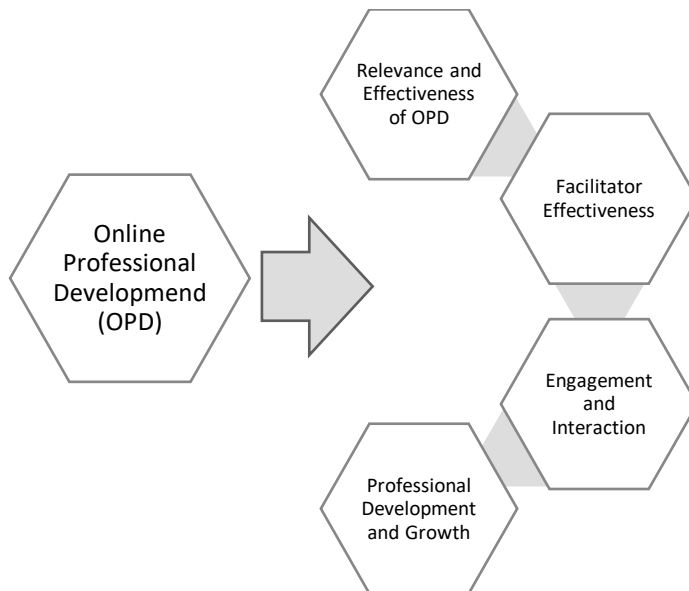


*Relevance and Effectiveness of OPD*

Views from lecturers pointed that that traditional professional development models often created struggles as it did not meet the diverse needs and schedules of modern professionals. However, online professional development (OPD) offered a flexible and accessible solution, providing opportunities for continuous learning and skill enhancement. Table 2 shows the relevance and effectiveness of OPD, examining its impact on individual and organizational growth, as well as its potential to bridge geographical and temporal divides.

**Table 2. Relevance and Effectiveness Of OPD**

| Excerpts | Coding | Emerging theme keywords |
|---|---|---|
| "I belief when I attend any OPD I should be able to learn the skills that I need for my teaching as well as for my personal development." | Expectation of learning | Beliefs towards OPD |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| "An effective OPD program should be tailored according to the staff's needs." | Tailored to needs | Effective OPD |
| "The duration really depends on the content." | Duration depends on content | OPD Experience |
| "I actually made the selection which one I want to attend, so when I went into the online courses, I felt that I have gained something." | Relevant content | OPD Experience |
| "I feel that an effective online professional development program will help me improve my professional practice, which means I will be able to reflect on my current practices and make changes if required to reflect to improve." | Improving professional practice | Effective OPD |
| "The content is something that's going to be engaging, going to be interesting. People would want to attend, to learn something fantastic that's already like a focal point there." | Engaging content | Effective OPD |
| "The duration I have attended so far is usually between 1.5 hours to 2 hours and there is another one type that constitutes the whole day like for example 9am-4pm, correct or not?" | Duration of OPD | OPD Experience |
| "I feel that it is a very important aspect of professional development in terms of the platforms that are being used and all because it serves a very important purpose because it gives an opportunity for people to learn skills, although they are not physically in a certain environment." | Importance of online PD | Beliefs towards OPD |
| "I feel that an effective online professional development program will help me improve my professional practice, which means I will be able to reflect on my current practices and make changes if required to reflect to improve." | Improving professional practice | Effective OPD |

The data presented in Table 2 provided valuable insights into educators' perceptions and experiences with Online Professional Development (OPD) programmes. Respondents viewed OPD as an essential tool for both professional and personal development. They recognized its importance in providing opportunities to learn new skills, especially when physical attendance is not possible. This positive attitude suggested that respondents were open to engaging in online learning experiences. Furthermore, according to the respondents, effective OPD programmes should be tailored to staff needs, offer quality, engaging and interesting content, provide opportunities for improving professional practice, allow for reflection on current practices and enable educators to make necessary changes for improvement. They also believed that OPD programmes will be effective if the programmes typically range from 1.5-2 hours for half day sessions and 5-6 hours for full-day sessions. Participants also responded that they should be given an opportunity to select courses that align with their interests and needs, rather than just be assigned to any that is available.

The peak of the findings suggested that respondents value the ability to choose their OPD programmes. This sense of agency may contribute to increased engagement and perceived value of the learning experience. In addition, participants also suggested that programme providers should deliver dynamic, self-directed online professional development opportunities for teachers that are accessible anytime and anywhere. This approach is parallel with previous finding on effectively reaching a broad and geographically dispersed audience with similar interests and educational concerns (Stanford-Bowers, 2008) while also addressing educators' need for flexibility (Singh et al, 2024; Smith & Wyness, 2024).

A recurring factor among the seven respondents is the importance of OPD in facilitating reflection on current practices and enabling educators to make improvements. This indicates that respondents see OPD not just as a means of acquiring new knowledge, but as a tool for continuous professional growth. These findings have important implications for the design and implementation of OPD programmes. Developers and administrators should focus on creating tailored, engaging content that allows for practical application and reflection (Bragg, et. al., 2021). Additionally, offering a variety of programme durations and topics can cater to diverse needs and preferences among educators. As pointed out in previous research, OPD for educators will be more effective than traditional face-to-face professional development (PD) in enhancing learning and critical thinking skills (Şendağ & Odabaşı, 2009) when it addresses teachers' professional learning needs (Farris, 2015), fosters social aspects of learning (Holmes, et. al., 2010), provides content that can be easily applied in classroom settings (Reeves & Pedulla, 2011), and encourages self-reflection (Behroozi & Osam, 2021).

*Facilitator Effectiveness*

Findings found that the effectiveness of Online professional development (OPD) is significantly influenced by the quality of facilitation. A skilled facilitator can create engaging and interactive learning experiences, foster meaningful discussions, and ultimately enhance participant outcomes. Table 3 exhibits participants' views on the critical role of facilitators in online professional development, displaying the key factors that contribute to the effectiveness and impact on learner engagement and satisfaction.

**Table 3. Facilitator Effectiveness**

| Excerpts | Code | Emerging theme keywords |
|---|---|---|
| "The facilitator is the kind of person who talks in a certain manner, for example very monotone and then sometimes they speak quite softly." | Facilitator delivery | Effective facilitator |
| "The passive consumption of information, when I said it earlier that when the facilitators are giving you all the information, it's very expanded." | Passive consumption | |
| "To overcome this, recommendation is the structure how it is facilitated. Facilitation should be better organised." | Facilitation structure | Recommendations to facilitation |
| "The passive consumption of information, when I said it earlier that when the facilitators are giving you all the information, it's very expanded. I feel like you know there is no l in between, you know, little, small activities like bite size activities to keep you interested and then it becomes passive consumption." | Passive consumption | Facilitation in OPD |
| "To overcome this, recommendation is the structure how it is facilitated. Facilitation should be better organised." | Facilitation structure | Recommendations to facilitation |
| "Maybe more break times. Because online is very exhausting like 5 mins in between. For the trainer to be more interactive and to ensure everyone is contributing and not let some participants dominate." | Breaks and facilitation | Recommendations to facilitation |

Based on Table 3, the effectiveness of online professional development (OPD) programmes indeed hinges significantly on the effectiveness of the facilitators. Data suggests that simply transferring in-person teaching techniques to online platforms often leads to monotonous delivery and passive consumption of information. Facilitators need to adapt their methods to engage participants actively (Chastnyk et al., 2024; Tadesse et al., 2024). Effective facilitators employ specific discourse strategies to create a safe and

collaborative environment, promoting mutual trust and egalitarian participation (Onrubia et al., 2024). Incorporating interactive elements and providing regular breaks can make OPD sessions more engaging.

Effective facilitations are crucial in restructuring sessions to include interactive elements, such as discussions, polls, and breakout rooms (Chastnyk et al., 2024). This helps maintain participant interest and engagement. Online environments can intensify challenges in group dynamics, such as participant domination. Facilitators need to be proactive in ensuring equal contribution and preventing any single participant from dominating the discussion (Onrubia et al., 2024). Facilitators should aim to deliver content concisely and allow ample time for interaction and discussion (Hepburn, et. al.,2023).

These strategies align with adult learning principles and best practices in online education, highlighting the importance of skilled facilitation in enhancing the effectiveness of OPD programmes Alkaabi, 2023). Proactive facilitation is essential to balance discussions and encourage diverse input, aligning with adult learning principles (Petkov, 2023; Tadesse et al., 2024).

*Theme 3: Engagement and Interaction*

Findings have clearly pointed out that the digital age has transformed the landscape of professional development, enabling individuals to access a wealth of learning opportunities through online platforms. While online learning offers flexibility and convenience, it presents unique challenges in fostering engagement and interaction among participants. This finding is parallel to Das (2023) that points out the various challenges online education brings. Previous studies have also similarly suggested that to maximize the effectiveness of online professional development (OPD), it is crucial to design programs that encourage active participation, meaningful dialogue, and collaborative learning experiences (Das, 2023). Table 4 presents the importance of engagement and interaction in OPD, examining strategies to create dynamic and stimulating online learning environments.

**Table 4. Engagement and Interaction**

| Excerpts | Code | Category |
|---|---|---|
| "It must involve some form of collaboration with other participants." | Collaboration | Interaction |
| "The way that the entire program or workshop is structured must be able to get the participants to be engaged." | Engaging structure | Engagement |
| "More collaboration among the network of teachers. I mean it's a community, you know, like teaching so I feel that somehow when you attend this online workshop, maybe there can be like a session where everybody gets to know something about each other." | Collaboration and networking | Collaborative engagement |
| "I think what's important is that face to face is better in terms of engagement. In online PD it is near zero in terms of engagement." | Engagement in online vs. face-to-face | Engagement |
| "It must involve some form of collaboration with other participants. This is when you when you say professional development, we are a group of professional and we want to assess what we're doing, whether the kind of materials that we use or our experience our experience in terms of our practice, it must be relevant." | Collaboration | Effective collaboration |
| "More collaboration among the network of teachers. I mean it's a community, you know, like teaching so I feel that somehow when you attend this online workshop, maybe there can be like a session where | Collaboration and networking | Engagement and interaction |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| everybody gets to know something about each other instead of let's start the workshop and this is what we're going to do, and these are the learning points." | | |

Based on the data analysis in Table 4, the findings highlight the critical role of engagement and interaction in online professional development (OPD) for teachers. Participants emphasized the importance of collaboration as a key component of effective OPD, suggesting that it should involve cooperative activities among participants. This aligns with the notion of teaching as a community-based profession, where sharing experiences and practices can enhance professional growth. The structure of OPD programmes was also identified as crucial, with participants expressing a need for engaging formats that promote active participation which parallels to the findings of Tadesse et al. (2024). Interestingly, there was a perception that face-to-face professional development offers superior engagement compared to online formats, with one participant noting that engagement in OPD can be "near zero." This therefore suggests a need for OPD designers to innovate and implement strategies that foster meaningful interaction in virtual environments.

The findings from past studies have highlighted the critical importance of engagement and interaction in online professional development (OPD) teachers, emphasizing the need for collaborative and structured formats (Deshmukh, et. al., 2020; Wang, et. al., 2023; Yoon, et. al., 2020). Effective OPD fosters cooperative activities, aligning with the community-based nature of teaching. High-quality OPD is closely linked to teachers' engagement, with collaboration serving as a vital factor that can enhance participation, even when motivation is low (He & Bagwell, 2022; Fütterer et al., 2024; Wang, 2024). Despite the potential of online platforms, studies have also pointed that many educators perceive face-to-face PD as more engaging, indicating a need for innovative strategies in OPD design to enhance interaction (Mulaimović et. al., 2024). Similar to the findings in this study, Fütterer et al.'s (2024) study also stated that participants rated their engagement in OPD lower than in face-to-face formats, suggesting a perceived deficit in online interaction quality. While the above data advocates enhanced engagement in OPD, it is crucial to recognize that not all participants thrive in online environments; some may prefer traditional formats, underscoring the need for diverse professional development options.

*Theme 4: Professional Development and Growth*

In today's rapidly evolving world, continuous learning and development have become essential for both personal and professional success. Professional development empowers individuals to acquire new skills, knowledge, and perspectives, enabling them to adapt to changing circumstances and advance their careers (Singh et al., 2024). Table 5 shows the multifaceted nature of professional development, examining its significance in fostering personal and organizational growth, as well as the strategies and resources available to individuals seeking to enhance their skills and knowledge.

**Table 5. Professional Development and Growth**

| Excerpts | Code | Category |
|---|---|---|
| "All the OPD programs I have attended have benefited me that actually help me to enhance my own professional learning." | Enhanced professional learning | development |
| "I think to a great extent it has enhanced my professional, but I have to be very specific. It is basically to do with skills to teach online using all the platforms and so on." | Enhanced teaching skills | growth |
| "The element of motivation sometimes when attend online PD and right after that I feel really high up and motivated because I've learned something new." | Motivation | motivated development |
| "I think it is very important; I mentioned just now. If I choose to attend the OPD program if I felt that I | Importance of OPD | Growth in T&L |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| can learn something from this program. I think the OPD actually helped me in my teaching that's why I felt that it is important for staff to choose the OPD program that can help them." | | |
| "For example, I think it was last year I attended a program it actually taught us how to search for information. Now this is for a higher level. They also provided workshops for our undergraduate students. So, this workshop for the staff or academicians who are starting to do research and for postgraduate students." | Applying OPD learning in teaching | development & career |
| "I think to a great extent it has enhanced my professional, but I have to be very specific. It is basically to do with skills to teach online using all the platforms and so on." | Enhanced teaching skills | growth |
| "I think it is important, very important because some of the online PD that I have attended there are people from different teaching backgrounds. And, if there's some sharing, then you see things from different perspectives." | Importance of online PD | growth |
| "The element of motivation sometimes when attend online PD and right after that I feel really high up and motivated because I've learned something new, something like, you know, to keep the momentum going because you know, sometimes you have lots of challenges when you're teaching so this, I think is one of the elements." | Motivation | motivated development |
| "I think if the content is relevant, it is important. I do apply and I also get to steal some tactics that the trainer used in my classroom to get the students attention." | Relevant content | growth |

As can be seen in Table 5, online professional development (OPD) programs significantly enhance educators' professional growth and teaching practices, particularly in online education contexts. Similar to the findings in past studies, this research findings also pointed that respondents reported improved skills in utilizing digital platforms and effective information retrieval, which directly translates into enhanced classroom practices (Dash, et. al., 2012; Musthofa et al., 2023; Shaha et al., 2015). The motivational aspect of OPD is crucial, as it encourages educators to pursue ongoing professional development and tackle teaching challenges, often facilitated by diverse peer interactions (Rienties et al., 2023). Furthermore, the immediate applicability of newly acquired strategies in classrooms underscores the practical benefits of these programmes, leading to improved educational quality (Schumaker et al., 2010).

OPD programmes foster substantial gains in educators' knowledge and skills, with studies indicating significant improvements in teaching practices and student outcomes (Shaha et al., 2015). Participants highlighted the importance of selecting relevant OPD that aligns with their specific teaching needs, enhancing the effectiveness of their learning experiences (Rienties et al., 2023). The collaborative nature of OPD, where educators share diverse perspectives, serves as a motivational factor, inspiring continuous professional growth. Educators reported feeling more equipped to overcome challenges in their teaching practices due to the support received through OPD. While OPD programmes show promise, some studies suggest that in-person coaching may yield more substantial impacts on teaching practices and student learning outcomes, indicating a potential limitation of virtual formats (Cilliers, 2022).

## Conclusion, Implication and Future Research

This study has provided valuable insights into ESL lecturers' perceptions of online professional development (OPD) programs and their impact on teaching practices. The findings revealed that while OPD is viewed as an essential tool for professional growth, several areas need improvement to enhance its effectiveness. Respondents emphasized the importance of relevant and engaging content tailored to their specific needs, as well as the critical role of skilled facilitators in promoting active participation. Furthermore, fostering collaboration and interaction among participants emerged as vital components for successful OPD experiences. Overall, the data suggests that OPD has the potential to significantly enhance educators' skills and motivation, ultimately benefiting their classroom practices. However, addressing the identified challenges will be crucial in maximizing the efficacy of online professional development.

Reflective analysis based on the findings of this study had initiated researchers to poit out several important suggestions to improve ESL instructors' access to OPD which include conducting needs assessments before program creation so that participants of the OPD may provide feedback on the design and help ensure that the material is interesting and relevant. Furthermore, it is imperative to allocate resources towards all-encompassing training programs for facilitators to develop competencies that support interactive learning environments, such as overseeing group dynamics and encouraging involvement. To maintain interest, programs should include interactive components like breakout sessions and cooperative exercises. Moreover, promoting reflective behaviours throughout the OPD experience will enable teachers to evaluate their own learning and incorporate fresh approaches into their instruction. Finally, a community of practice can be promoted by setting up organized venues for networking and collaboration, such as peer review groups and discussion forums.

The implications of this study emphasize the importance of improving online professional development (OPD) programs for ESL lecturers. While OPD is widely regarded as a valuable tool for professional growth, policy makers, higher education management and supervisors need to ensure that when designing any professional development, the need for more tailored and engaging content that addresses the specific needs of participants must be first studied. In addition, having skilled facilitators who can foster active participation and collaboration are essential for creating an interactive learning environment. The study suggests that addressing these factors can enhance the overall effectiveness of OPD, ultimately improving teaching practices and educators' motivation from almost anywhere in the world.

Future research should consider OPD program designs that offer more personalized, needs-based content and ensure that the facilitators have the required competencies to manage group dynamics and engage participants effectively. Research might focus on the interactive elements such as breakout sessions and peer review groups that affect learning outcomes and teaching practices of the participants. This could also include long-term effects of OPD on classroom performance and professional growth to understand how online development programs can be optimized for continued improvement. Investigating how a community of practice plays a role in promoting this kind of development may result in better strategies for spreading collaboration and reflective practices through the educational workforce.

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