



Examining Professional Development Programs for ‘English as Foreign Language’ Teachers in Benin: A Qualitative Inquiry

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Abstract

This study explores the perceptions of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers in Benin regarding the effectiveness of professional development (PD) programs and their impact on teaching quality. Using a qualitative descriptive case study approach, the research aims to examine how EFL teachers perceive the implementation of PD programs and their influence on teaching practices and student outcomes. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with 10 EFL teachers from Porto-Novo and through document analysis of relevant policies and reports. Thematic analysis revealed that teachers view PD as an ongoing process that enhances their skills, fosters self-reflection, and improves classroom management and teaching effectiveness. However, challenges such as heavy workloads and limited resources were identified as barriers to full participation and engagement. The study highlights the importance of sustained, relevant, and collaborative PD opportunities to improve teaching quality. The findings suggest that while PD programs have the potential to enhance teachers’ professional growth and teaching practices, structural and contextual challenges must be addressed to optimize their impact. Recommendations include fostering collaboration among teachers, ensuring practical relevance, providing adequate support and resources, and enhancing intrinsic motivation. The study contributes to understanding PD within Benin’s education system and offers insights to improve teacher development initiatives in Sub-Saharan Africa.

Keywords: Professional development, EFL teachers, teaching quality, teacher growth, Benin.

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Introduction

English has become the dominant language of international trade, education, and diplomacy, creating unprecedented demand for high-quality English-language instruction worldwide (Shah et al., 2024). In nations where English is taught as a foreign language, the effectiveness of instruction depends fundamentally on teacher quality. As a result, teacher professional development, the continuous process of improving teachers' knowledge and skills, has emerged as a central concern for educational policymakers and researchers alike (Day, 1999; Guskey, 2000). Professional development is now widely recognized as essential for introducing instructional improvements, enhancing teacher effectiveness, and ultimately improving student learning outcomes (Desimone, 2009; Guskey, 2000; Su & Wang, 2022; Ventista & Brown, 2023). Whether EFL teachers are qualified or not, they need to keep abreast of recent developments in their field (Iwikotan & Dossou, 2017). In the context of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teaching, ongoing professional development is critical because it is a continuous process through which teachers seek to improve their pedagogical skills (Mohamed & El Deen, 2023).

Despite this recognition, research consistently demonstrates that many professional development initiatives fail to produce meaningful changes in teachers' classroom practices or student achievement (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017). This implementation gap between the promise of professional development and its actual impact is particularly pronounced in contexts where educational systems face significant structural challenges. The effectiveness of professional development is shaped not only by program design but also by the specific conditions under which teachers work, including resource availability, administrative support, and existing teacher qualifications (Desimone, 2009; Guskey, 2002).

In Benin, a West African nation where English is taught as a foreign language, these challenges are especially acute. The quality of English language instruction remains a persistent concern despite government investments in educational reform. A staggering 70% of Benin's teachers lack formal teaching qualifications (Bankolé-Minaflinou, 2018), contributing to ineffective instructional practices and significant gaps in student learning outcomes (Hounkpe, 2015). EFL teachers in Benin face challenging constraints, including heavy teaching loads, inadequate instructional materials and limited administrative support (Iwikotan et al., 2025). While teachers themselves recognize the importance of professional development and participate in weekly and regional workshops (Iwikotan et al., 2025), research suggests that insufficient training and experience prevent many from implementing effective teaching strategies (Loko et al., 2025). Furthermore, research revealed that challenges to professional development include a lack of documentation and administrative support, as well as the fact that the coordinators of the weekly professional development meetings are not creative (Iwikotan & Dossou, 2017).

The Beninese government has acknowledged these challenges through its 2018–2030 Education Sector Plan, which prioritizes the development of competent, motivated teachers who can contribute to sustainable improvements in learning outcomes. Central to this vision is the expansion of targeted professional development initiatives for teachers. However, the actual impact of these programs remains largely unexamined. Existing research on professional development in Benin has primarily focused on identifying challenges and documenting participation patterns (Iwikotan et al., 2025; Iwikotan & Dossou, 2017), rather than on how teachers experience professional development or whether these programs influence their classroom practices. This gap is significant because, without understanding the mechanisms and conditions that determine effectiveness, educational reforms risk

perpetuating resource-intensive initiatives that fail to deliver meaningful improvement.

This study addresses this gap by examining the effectiveness of professional development programs for EFL teachers in Benin through a qualitative inquiry. Specifically, the study investigates how teachers perceive professional development activities, the extent to which these activities influence their teaching practices, and the factors that enable or constrain professional growth. Through semi-structured interviews with EFL teachers, this research seeks to identify the strengths and weaknesses of existing professional development practices and generate insights to inform future educational policy. Beyond its immediate context, this study contributes to the broader understanding of teacher professional development in Sub-Saharan Africa, where similar challenges of teacher quality, resource constraints, and system-wide reform intersect.

Concept of Professional Development

The concept of professional development has been conceptualized in diverse ways across the literature. Two dominant perspectives emerge: a developmental perspective and a professionalizing perspective (Fessler, 1992; Day, 1999). The developmental perspective frames professional development as a career progression. Fessler (1992) proposed a developmental sequence encompassing initial training, entry into the profession, skill consolidation, enthusiasm, frustration, stability, disengagement, and ultimately departure from the profession. This perspective emphasizes the temporal and stage-based nature of teacher growth. The professionalizing perspective, by contrast, defines professional development as a process of learning, encompassing both initial and continuing education. In one of the most comprehensive definitions, Day (1999, p. 4) articulates professional development as: *“All natural learning experiences and those conscious and planned activities which are intended to be of direct or indirect benefit to the individual, group, or school, and which contribute, through these, to the quality of education in the classroom. It is the process by which, alone and with others, teachers review, renew, and extend their commitment as change agents to the moral purposes of teaching; and by which they acquire and develop the knowledge, skills, and emotional intelligence essential to good professional thinking, planning, and practice.”*

This definition establishes several foundational principles: professional development encompasses both formal and informal learning; it operates at the individual, group, and institutional levels; and its ultimate aim is to improve educational quality.

Contemporary scholars have built upon this foundation. Guskey (2000) asserts that notable improvements in education rarely occur without professional development, positioning it as a necessary condition for educational change. Similarly, the OECD (2009) defines professional development as activities and supports that strengthen teachers' knowledge, skills, and professional qualities. Ji and Cao (2016, p. 2061) describe it as “the process of constantly strengthening professional attainment, broadening academic knowledge, enhancing professional skills, and improving teaching ability.” Postholm (2012) offers a concise formulation: teacher professional development is teachers' learning how they learn to learn and how they apply their knowledge in practice to support student learning. Across these definitions, several common elements emerge: professional development is (a) ongoing rather than episodic, (b) aimed at improving knowledge, skills, and practice, and (c) ultimately oriented toward enhancing student learning outcomes.

Characteristics of Effective Professional Development

A substantial body of research has investigated the features that distinguish effective professional development from ineffective initiatives. Darling-Hammond et al. (2017) identified seven characteristics of effective professional development in a comprehensive review. Effective programs are content-focused; incorporate active learning that draws on adult learning theory; support collaboration, typically in job-embedded contexts; employ models and modelling of effective practice; provide coaching and expert support; offer opportunities for feedback and reflection; and are sustained in duration.

These characteristics align with earlier findings. Garet et al. (2001) identified three features positively associated with teachers' self-reported increases in knowledge and skills: emphasis on content knowledge, opportunities for active learning, and coherence with other learning activities. The OECD (2005) similarly emphasized that effective professional development is ongoing, includes training, practice, and feedback, and provides adequate time and follow-up support. The dimension of duration warrants particular attention. Darling-Hammond et al. (2017) emphasize that effective professional development provides teachers with adequate time to learn, practice, implement, and reflect upon new strategies. Strong initiatives typically engage teachers over weeks, months, or academic years rather than in short, one-off workshops. This finding challenges the prevalent workshop model that characterizes much professional development practice globally. Collaboration represents another critical dimension. Effective professional development creates space for teachers to share ideas and collaborate in their learning, often in job-embedded contexts that connect new instructional strategies to teachers' students and classrooms (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017). This collaborative dimension aligns with broader understandings of teacher learning as socially situated (Vygotsky, 1978). Richit (2021) synthesized the literature into five categories underpinning teacher professional development: professional knowledge (theoretical foundations), professional learning (improvement through practice), professional culture (values and practices legitimized by teacher groups), the ethical dimension of teaching (commitment to overcoming educational inequalities), and changes in practice (critical modification of classroom practices, beliefs, and dispositions).

Professional Development in EFL Contexts

Research specific to English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teacher professional development highlights distinctive considerations. Galaczi et al. (2018) note that professional development for EFL teachers serves dual purposes: introducing new tools or skills and updating existing ones. Additionally, EFL teachers require the knowledge and skills to understand and effectively implement the curriculum, learning materials, and assessments. Specifically, in EFL contexts, Mohamed and El Deen (2023) found that teachers developed stronger orientations toward professional development and improved certain aspects of their classroom performance. Utami et al. (2019) reported that well-designed professional development experiences enrich teachers' knowledge while translating into improved classroom practices and meaningful learning gains for students.

Karim et al. (2025) documented consistent positive changes across five indicators resulting from professional development: professional growth, instructional practices, student-centered adjustment, student engagement, and academic achievement. Their findings further revealed that professional development may enhance teachers' self-confidence, increase the use of innovative teaching strategies, and improve responsiveness to students' needs, with teachers reporting improvements in students' academic performance in speaking, writing, and comprehension. Ventista and Brown (2023)

catalogued the range of professional development activities available to teachers, including training, mentoring, peer collaboration through classroom observations, learning communities or communities of practice, reflection, action research, co-teaching, conferences, and postgraduate courses. For EFL teachers specifically, Iwikotan et al. (2025) found that reading journals and attending seminars and workshops represent accessible pathways for professional growth.

Challenges to Effective Professional Development

Despite recognition of its importance, implementing professional development faces significant challenges. Darling-Hammond et al. (2017) observe that professional learning, as it currently stands, is often “poorly conceived and deeply flawed,” with teachers lacking time and opportunities to observe colleagues’ classrooms, learn from mentors, and collaborate. Support and training are frequently “episodic, myopic, and often meaningless.”

Research has identified multiple barriers across different contexts. In Tanzania, Komba and Mwakabenga (2019) identified challenges, including a lack of explicit policy and guidelines for teacher professional development, limited knowledge among stakeholders, predominance of traditional approaches, and ineffective organization of activities. Cadero-Smith (2020) documented a broader range of challenges: funding limitations, workloads exceeding personnel capacity, inadequate support for administrators, difficulties recruiting and retaining teachers, distance from resources, lack of time, and the complex, resource-intensive nature of effective professional development. In the Beninese context specifically, Iwikotan et al. (2025) found that EFL teachers face heavy teaching loads, inadequate materials and equipment, limited administrative support, and insufficient access to ongoing training. While teachers recognize the importance of professional development and participate in weekly and regional workshops, these initiatives often fail to provide the depth and continuity necessary for meaningful practice change (Loko et al., 2025).

A further challenge concerns translating professional development into improved student outcomes. Kuijpers et al. (2010) suggest that one reason for the limited impact on student achievement is that professional development programs tend to emphasize teaching quality while paying insufficient attention to the conditions necessary to support teachers’ performance at the school level. Similarly, Padillo et al. (2021) found that while professional development activities helped teachers achieve mastery in instructional planning, delivery, subject knowledge, rapport with students, and classroom management, these activities were perceived to offer little benefit to teachers, suggesting a gap between program intentions and teachers’ experiences.

The literature reviewed reveals several key findings. First, professional development is consistently recognized as essential for improving teaching quality and student outcomes (Guskey, 2000; Darling-Hammond et al., 2017; Asmare, 2025). Second, effectiveness is associated with specific characteristics: content focus, active learning, collaboration, sustained duration, and job-embedded support (Garet et al., 2001; Darling-Hammond et al., 2017). Third, implementation is frequently undermined by structural constraints, including inadequate time, resources, and policy support (Komba & Mwakabenga, 2019; Cadero-Smith, 2020). Fourth, in EFL contexts specifically, professional development shows promise for improving instructional practices and student outcomes, though effectiveness depends on alignment with teachers’ needs and contexts (Karim et al., 2025; Iwikotan et al., 2025). However, the literature also reveals significant gaps. Research on the effectiveness of professional development in Sub-Saharan African contexts, particularly in Benin, remains limited. Existing studies have focused primarily on identifying challenges (Iwikotan et al., 2025; Loko et al., 2025) rather than systematically examining

how teachers experience professional development or whether these programs influence classroom practices. Furthermore, the voices of teachers themselves, their perceptions of what works, what does not, and why, remain underrepresented in the literature.

Theoretical framework

This study draws upon two prominent theories to examine the effectiveness of professional development programs for EFL teachers in Benin: Guskey's Model of Teacher Change and Schön's Reflective Practice Theory. Both theories emphasize the importance of professional growth in enhancing teaching effectiveness and student outcomes, offering a comprehensive understanding of how professional development shapes EFL teachers' practices.

Guskey's Model of Teacher Change (2002) focuses on the link between professional development, teacher change, and student achievement. Guskey argues that for professional development to be effective, it must lead to measurable changes in teachers' knowledge and teaching practices, which, in turn, influence student outcomes. This model emphasizes the need for professional development programs not only to improve teachers' skills but also to demonstrate tangible benefits for student performance. The framework is particularly relevant to the current study as it evaluates how professional development programs contribute to the evolution of teachers' practices in Benin and their direct impact on classroom effectiveness and student achievement.

Schön's Reflective Practice Theory (1983) underscores the importance of self-reflection in teacher development. Schön posits that effective teachers engage in both reflection-in-action, adjusting teaching strategies in real-time, and reflection-on-action, analyzing past lessons to improve future practices. This theory aligns with the study's findings that EFL teachers perceive professional development as a continuous process of self-reflection, enabling them to refine their teaching methods in response to feedback from PD activities. Schön's theory helps explain how teachers use professional development programs not only to acquire new knowledge but also to critically evaluate and adapt their teaching practices, fostering continuous improvement in teaching quality.

Together, Guskey's model provides a framework for understanding the impact of professional development on teacher effectiveness and student learning outcomes, while Schön's theory emphasizes the role of reflective practice in teachers' ongoing development. Both theories are essential in explaining how professional development programs contribute to the growth of EFL teachers and enhance teaching quality in Benin, making them integral to the study's exploration of PD's effectiveness in this context.

Research Methodology

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative research methodology, specifically a descriptive case study design, to explore teachers' perceptions of the implementation of professional development programs and their impact on teaching quality. The qualitative approach was selected because it is particularly suited to exploring the meanings participants attribute to their experiences and understanding phenomena within their natural contexts (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Qualitative research is particularly effective for exploring the meanings participants attribute to their experiences (Creswell, 2014) and, in this context, allows for a deeper understanding of teachers' lived experiences of professional development. A case

study approach was selected because it enables the researcher to gain a detailed, contextually rich understanding of the phenomenon within a specific real-world setting (Yin, 2018). This approach also offers the flexibility to gather both rich narrative data and contextual insights into teachers' experiences with professional development programs.

Participants

Participants were selected through purposive sampling, a qualitative research strategy that identifies individuals with rich knowledge relevant to the research phenomenon (Patton, 2015). Within purposeful sampling, the study employed criterion sampling, establishing specific criteria to ensure participants could meaningfully address the research questions. Fourteen participants were drawn from Porto-Novo, Benin, including 10 EFL teachers. The sample was purposively selected to ensure participants had relevant experience and could provide in-depth insights into the research topic. Each participant who agreed to take part in the study was asked to complete a consent form that outlined the conditions of participation, including guarantees of confidentiality and anonymity (Creswell, 2014). The research was voluntary, and the researcher ensured that participants fully understood the study's purpose and their rights throughout the process. The data collection period lasted two weeks, giving both school administrators and teachers time to reflect before participating in interviews.

Data Collection

Data were collected through two primary sources: semi-structured interviews and document review. Semi-structured interviews served as the primary data collection method. This format was selected because it balances consistency across participants through a core set of predetermined questions while allowing flexibility to explore emergent topics and follow participant responses in depth (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). An interview protocol was developed based on the study's research questions and the theoretical framework. The protocol included questions addressing: participants' experiences with professional development programs; perceptions of program effectiveness and impact on teaching practice; factors facilitating or constraining professional growth; and recommendations for improving professional development initiatives. Interviews were conducted in a location of each participant's choosing, typically at their school or a neutral off-site location. Each interview lasted between 35 and 55 minutes. With participant consent, all interviews were audio-recorded using a digital recorder. In addition to recordings, the researcher maintained field notes documenting observations, contextual details, and preliminary reflections following each interview.

To complement interview data, relevant policy documents and professional development program materials were collected and analyzed. These documents included: national education sector plans, professional development program curricula and materials, and Ministry of Education guidelines on teacher development. Document review served to contextualize interview findings and provided insight into the formal structures and intended outcomes of professional development initiatives (Bowen, 2009).

Data Analysis

Data analysis followed a systematic, iterative process informed by thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The analysis proceeded through the following phases: transcription and member checking, coding, thematic development, and document analysis. All audio-recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim by the researcher. Transcripts were reviewed against the original recordings to ensure accuracy. Following transcription, each participant was provided with their transcript to review. This member-checking process allowed participants to verify the accuracy of their statements, correct any misinterpretations, and withdraw any content they did not wish included. All participants confirmed the accuracy of their transcripts.

Transcripts were imported into qualitative data analysis software for systematic coding. The researcher engaged in two cycles of coding (initial and axial coding). Transcripts were read multiple times to develop familiarity with the data. Open coding was conducted to identify meaningful segments of text and assign descriptive codes. Initial codes were grouped into broader categories and themes. This process was guided by both the theoretical framework and emergent patterns identified within the data.

Through iterative review and refinement, categories were synthesized into overarching themes that addressed the research questions. Themes were reviewed for internal consistency and external distinctiveness, ensuring each theme represented a coherent pattern across participants while remaining distinguishable from other themes. Documents were analyzed using a similar coding approach, with attention to how policy articulated professional development expectations, structures, and intended outcomes. Document analysis contextualized interview findings and identified alignment or misalignment between policy intentions and participants' experiences.

Trustworthiness

To ensure the trustworthiness and rigor of this study, the researcher employed strategies based on Lincoln and Guba's (1985) criteria for qualitative research. To enhance credibility, member checking was utilized, allowing participants to review and verify the accuracy of the findings. Additionally, prolonged engagement with participants and thick descriptions of their perspectives were used to deepen the understanding of their experiences. For transferability, the study provided detailed descriptions of the research context, participants, and sampling criteria, enabling readers to assess the applicability of the findings to other settings. To ensure dependability, the researcher maintained transparency by documenting all research procedures and maintaining an audit trail. Finally, confirmability was achieved by using direct quotations from participants to ground the findings in their actual voices, alongside reflexive attention to the researcher's positionality to acknowledge any potential biases. These strategies collectively supported the trustworthiness and rigor of the study's findings.

Findings

The study aimed at investigating the implementation of teacher professional development policies. The researcher sought information on the perceptions of school administrators and teachers regarding teacher professional development programs designed to improve teaching quality. The following are the findings from the descriptive analysis of data collected in this study, answering the following research questions:

- How do you perceive EFL professional development?
- How do EFL teachers perceive professional development activities on their teaching practices?

Thematic Analysis of EFL Teachers' Perceptions on Professional Development

The thematic analysis of EFL teachers' perceptions of professional development (PD) in Benin reveals several key themes that underscore the importance of PD in enhancing their teaching practices. These themes include the ongoing process of growth, skill acquisition, teaching performance enhancement, the impact on student learning, and the role of collaboration. Teachers' views reflect the integral role of PD in shaping their professional identity and improving classroom effectiveness. Below is a comprehensive breakdown of these themes, supported by direct quotations from the participants.

Sub-theme 1: Ongoing Process of Growth

A consistent theme in the teachers' responses is the perception of PD as an ongoing, evolving process aimed at continuous improvement. Teachers emphasized that professional development begins with initial training and continues throughout their careers, underscoring that learning does not end after formal training. EFL Teacher B noted, *“Professional development is a process that begins with initial training and continues during continuous training.”* Similarly, EFL Teacher A described PD as *“the process of change in which teachers gradually improve their practice, master their work, and feel comfortable in their classroom.”* These responses suggest that PD is viewed as a lifelong journey, crucial for both individual teacher growth and the broader educational environment. This theme highlights that PD is a sustained process with long-term benefits for teachers and their practices.

Sub-theme 2: Skill Acquisition and Knowledge Improvement

Another prominent theme is that PD is fundamentally about acquiring new skills and knowledge to enhance teaching effectiveness. Teachers highlighted that PD helps them develop expertise and improve classroom performance and teaching effectiveness. For instance, Teacher C stated, *“Professional development describes various ways of developing expertise and skills related to the field of teaching by acquiring new skills and knowledge.”* EFL Teacher F also emphasized that PD is designed to *“increase the professional knowledge, skills, and attitudes of educators, so that they can, in turn, improve student learning.”* These statements illustrate that PD not only enhances theoretical knowledge but also provides practical skills that directly impact teaching methods, thereby improving the overall quality of teaching.

Sub-theme 3: Enhancement of Teaching Performance

A key theme that emerged from the teachers' responses is the link between PD and enhanced teaching performance. Teachers described PD as a vital tool for improving their classroom management, lesson delivery, and pedagogical skills. This performance enhancement is not limited to content knowledge but also includes pedagogical skills and classroom management techniques. EFL Teacher D explained, *“Professional development is a form of education or training that provides new skills and knowledge that improve teaching performance,”* aligning with EFL Teacher A's description of PD as helping teachers to *“gradually improve our practice, master our work, and feel comfortable in the classroom.”* Similarly, EFL Teacher H noted that PD offers *“valuable knowledge and tools that I can use in the teaching field.”* This indicates that PD not only enhances teachers' confidence and competence but also empowers them to navigate professional challenges more effectively.

Sub-theme 4: Impact on Student Learning

A central theme in the teachers' responses is the impact of PD on student learning outcomes. Teachers recognized that the ultimate goal of PD is to improve student success by enhancing teaching practices. Professional development is directly correlated with students' academic success. EFL Teacher F emphasized, *“Professional development is a set of processes and activities designed to increase the professional knowledge, skills, and attitudes of educators, so that they can, in turn, improve student learning.”* This perspective highlights the strong connection between PD and its ability to foster a more effective learning environment, with teachers' professional growth leading to improved student academic achievement.

Sub-theme 5: Collaboration and Support Networks

Collaboration and the creation of support networks emerged as another central theme. Teachers reported that PD provides opportunities for collaboration, idea sharing, and relationship building with peers. EFL Teacher E stated, *“Professional development can also provide teachers with a sense of belonging and support, allowing them to collaborate and exchange with colleagues who share similar interests and goals.”* EFL Teacher G echoed this by noting, *“Professional development programs enable teachers to build relationships with their peers and establish support networks, leading to sharing ideas, a collaborative approach to problems, and increased confidence.”* These quotes illustrate the importance of professional collaboration, where teachers can share strategies and challenges, enhance their sense of community, and reinforce professional growth.

Sub-theme 6: Professional Fulfillment and Confidence

Several teachers highlighted that PD contributes to their professional fulfillment and confidence. EFL Teacher D shared, *“It can also lead to a sense of professional fulfillment, increased confidence, and greater job satisfaction.”* Similarly, EFL Teacher G noted that PD helps teachers build relationships and share ideas, which leads to *“increased confidence.”* These responses suggest that PD not only enhances teachers’ professional capabilities but also positively affects their job satisfaction and self-assurance in their roles.

Sub-theme 7: Practical Application and Pedagogical Strategies

Finally, many teachers emphasized that PD provides them with practical strategies and tools that can be immediately applied in their classrooms. These tools help teachers manage classrooms effectively, engage students, and deliver the curriculum. EFL Teacher H explained, *“Professional development aims to help us, as teachers, acquire practical knowledge and strategies to deliver the curriculum in an effective, fun, and pedagogical manner, managing time and fostering a friendly atmosphere.”* This practical orientation ensures that PD is relevant to teachers’ daily challenges, helping them improve both their pedagogical skills and classroom management.

The thematic analysis of teachers’ perceptions of professional development reveals that PD is viewed as a continuous, transformative process that enhances teaching skills, improves classroom practices, fosters career growth, and positively impacts student outcomes. Teachers perceived PD as a powerful tool for self-reflection, skill acquisition, and professional collaboration. While PD is widely regarded as beneficial for professional growth, the findings emphasize that its effectiveness depends on continuous engagement, practical relevance, and opportunities for collaboration. By focusing on both individual and collective improvement, PD plays a pivotal role in shaping the quality of education and enhancing teachers’ professional identities in Benin’s secondary schools.

Sub-theme 8: Mandatory Participation as Structural Reality

This sub-theme provides a systematic examination of teachers’ accounts of mandatory professional development structures in Benin. The analysis reveals a formalized, institutionalized system characterized by mandatory participation across multiple levels and temporal organization throughout the academic year. These structural features shape the conditions within which professional development occurs, with implications for teacher agency, learning engagement, and ultimately, professional development effectiveness.

The findings revealed that the workshops and pedagogical days are mandatory and well-structured, indicating a strong organizational commitment to teacher development. Teachers consistently confirmed that participation in these workshops was mandatory and part of their professional obligations. The mandatory nature of the professional development programs ensures that all teachers engage in these opportunities to improve their practices. EFL Teacher A emphasized, *“We have mandatory workshops scheduled throughout the year, and they are part of our professional commitment.”* This structured approach aligns with the requirements set by the educational policies, ensuring regular engagement with professional development initiatives.

Teachers highlighted that zonal workshops, which bring together teachers from different schools within a zone, were considered important for improving their teaching skills. These workshops are formalized and scheduled, with clear objectives aimed at improving classroom practices and teaching strategies. EFL Teacher B stated, *“The zonal workshops allow us to meet with colleagues from other schools, share ideas, and learn new methods to apply in our classrooms.”* Similarly, Teacher C noted, *“We also attend school workshops, which are regularly scheduled and provide us with a clear framework for teaching improvement.”* These workshops are perceived as essential for refining their professional practices, demonstrating the importance of collaborative learning in improving the quality of education.

Pedagogical days, organized at the end of the school year, were viewed as significant opportunities for teachers to come together, reflect on their teaching practices, and exchange knowledge and strategies. These days, which typically last for three days, provide a platform for teachers within the same zone to discuss their challenges, reflect on their performance, and engage in professional dialogue. EFL Teacher D explained, *“The pedagogical days are crucial for reflecting on our teaching practices. It is a time for all teachers in the zone to share experiences, challenges, and solutions.”* Teacher E emphasized, *“These days provide an opportunity for professional reflection and allow us to learn from others in the same zone.”* The collaborative nature of pedagogical days fosters a sense of community and mutual support among teachers, enabling them to address common issues and collectively improve their teaching practices.

These mandatory professional development activities contribute significantly to teachers’ professional growth and enhance their knowledge and teaching practices. Teachers reported that participating in workshops and pedagogical days helped them stay up to date on new teaching methodologies, curriculum changes, and classroom management techniques. EFL Teacher F noted, *“These workshops allow us to learn about new teaching techniques and strategies that we can use in the classroom.”* Similarly, Teacher G pointed out, *“The professional development programs help me refine my teaching skills, especially in areas where I feel I need improvement.”* The collective emphasis on continuous professional development underscores the importance of these activities in helping teachers maintain high teaching standards.

While the teachers acknowledged the value of professional development workshops, several expressed concerns about balancing their teaching duties with the time demands of these activities. EFL Teacher I shared, *“The increase in teaching hours, in the weekly quota of lesson hours from 22 to 30 hours, and student load makes it difficult to participate fully in professional development activities. We are often too tired to focus on the workshops after teaching all day.”* This sentiment was echoed by several teachers, highlighting the difficulty of managing professional development alongside heavy workloads. These concerns point to the need to better integrate PD activities with teachers’ schedules

and workloads to ensure the training is effective and sustainable.

Despite the challenges, teachers widely recognized the positive impact that these professional development programs had on their teaching effectiveness. They believed that the knowledge and skills gained through workshops and pedagogical days contributed to improvements in classroom management, lesson planning, and overall teaching quality. EFL Teacher H emphasized, “*The knowledge I gain from these workshops helps me to manage my classroom better and to implement more effective teaching strategies.*” This suggests that PD activities provide teachers with valuable tools and resources that directly impact their classroom performance.

Teachers described participation across multiple levels of professional development activity: school workshops, zonal workshops, and pedagogical days. This multi-level structure suggests a tiered system of professional development operating at different scales of educational organization. The existence of a multi-level, structured professional development system represents institutional investment in teacher development. However, the mandatory nature of participation across all levels raises questions about whether this system prioritizes coverage (ensuring all teachers participate) over quality (ensuring meaningful learning).

Document Analysis: Teacher Professional Development Policies in Benin

The document analysis reveals both strengths and limitations in the implementation of teacher professional development (TPD) policies for secondary school teachers in Benin. The analysis draws on government documents, educational decrees, and interviews with education administrators to provide a comprehensive view of the country’s professional development landscape.

Government Policies on Teacher Professional Development

The Beninese government has established formal policies requiring secondary school teachers to undergo professional development at least every two to three years, as stipulated in Decree N° 2015-592. This decree mandates that the government organize professional development programs aimed at enhancing teachers’ skills and knowledge, specifically for in-service teachers. These programs are essential for maintaining the quality of education in secondary schools and improving teachers’ competencies. While the policy exists, its implementation has been challenged by various factors, including resource limitations and logistical constraints. Nonetheless, administrators acknowledge that the government has made significant efforts to create a supportive environment for continuous teacher development.

Current Implementation Practices

The findings from the document review and interviews highlight several key practices for implementing TPD programs in Benin’s secondary schools. One of the primary methods of professional development is the school- and zonal-level workshops, which are formalized within secondary schools. The school workshops are held weekly, with all teachers participating in educational activities specific to their departments under the supervision of the subject head. Each workshop lasts approximately two hours. Principals are tasked with ensuring these workshops are carried out and are responsible for organizing classroom visits, either with or without the head of the subject, to monitor and follow up on the activities. The head of subjects plays a vital role in supporting teachers through these workshops by offering guidance, conducting class visits, and holding informal consultations. The zonal

workshops are carried out by the pedagogical advisor three times per year.

Pedagogical Support and Supervision

In addition to the school workshops, the pedagogical advisors and inspectors play crucial roles in supporting teachers' professional growth. The pedagogical advisor provides local pedagogical support, establishing regular contact with teachers to identify and address educational challenges. The advisor also works closely with the pedagogical inspector, who has multiple responsibilities, including supervising teaching practices, conducting training sessions, evaluating teachers, and managing the overall pedagogical development within schools. Together, the pedagogical advisors and inspectors form a supervisory team that ensures the quality and regularity of teaching practices and offers guidance on implementing new curricula, particularly the competency-based approach.

While teachers recognize the value of these training sessions, they acknowledge that the training provided is not always sufficient. Teachers highlighted the necessity of continuous professional development, as it enables them to refine their teaching techniques and stay up to date with changes in the curriculum and pedagogical practices. The mandatory training sessions also provide opportunities for teachers to share their perspectives on instructional methods and discuss how to better implement the competency-based curriculum in their classrooms.

Teacher Perceptions and Challenges

The majority of teachers perceive the ongoing professional development programs as essential for enhancing their teaching efficacy, boosting their self-confidence, and improving their classroom management and pedagogical skills. The interviews reveal that teachers believe they gain additional skills, enhance their professionalism, and stay current with changes in the educational system, particularly regarding curriculum updates. Teachers expressed appreciation for how these programs contribute to their professional growth, as they are designed to align with both personal development goals and the evolving demands of the educational environment.

Despite these positive perceptions, some teachers expressed concerns about the adequacy and frequency of the training. Several participants noted that while the professional development initiatives are important, they are not enough to address all the challenges they face in their classrooms. Some teachers, especially those with limited experience, indicated that insufficient and specialized training hinders their ability to effectively implement the curriculum and meet the diverse needs of their students. This training gap highlights the need for more targeted, sustained, and comprehensive professional development opportunities to help teachers fully engage with their roles and improve student learning outcomes.

In conclusion, the document analysis indicates that the Beninese government has made significant strides in promoting teacher professional development through formal policies and regular training initiatives. However, challenges related to the frequency, quality, and specificity of the training persist. While teachers recognize the benefits of these programs, including enhanced classroom performance and increased professional competence, there is a consensus that more comprehensive and continuous professional development opportunities are needed to address the demands of the evolving education system effectively. The findings suggest that while the current professional development framework offers some benefits, it requires further refinement to meet teachers' needs and improve overall educational outcomes fully.

Discussion

EFL teachers perceive PD as a continuous, lifelong process essential for their growth and development. They emphasized that professional development extends beyond initial training and continues throughout their careers. This aligns with the developmental perspective of professional development, which views it as a career-long journey (Fessler, 1992). Moreover, teachers universally agreed that PD enhances their professional knowledge and skills, making them more effective educators. This perception aligns with the professionalizing perspective of PD, as described by Day (1999), which emphasizes learning through continuous educational activities aimed at improving teachers' expertise. Furthermore, the findings revealed that PD plays a critical role in improving teaching performance. Teachers acknowledged that PD not only strengthens their knowledge but also refines their pedagogical practices and classroom management techniques. As Teacher D noted, PD "provides new skills and knowledge that improve teaching performance." This reflects Guskey's (2002) model of teacher change, which highlights the importance of PD in effecting measurable changes in teachers' practices that improve teaching quality. In turn, the teachers in this study viewed PD as a means to enhance their teaching strategies and become more confident and effective in their roles.

In addition, the results also showed a direct connection between their professional development and improved student learning outcomes. This perception aligns with Guskey's (2000) assertion that PD must lead to changes in teachers' practices that ultimately result in better student achievement. Another key theme that emerged was the value of collaboration and peer support through PD programs. Teachers valued the opportunities to collaborate with colleagues and build support networks, which helped them to share ideas, solve problems, and gain new insights into their teaching practices. This collaborative aspect of PD is consistent with Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory (1978), which emphasizes the importance of social interaction and collaboration in learning. PD programs that encourage collaboration help teachers create a sense of community and foster professional growth in a collective, supportive environment.

Moreover, teachers reported that PD programs contributed to their professional fulfillment and boosted their confidence. PD was seen as a way to enhance their teaching effectiveness and job satisfaction. Teacher D's statement that PD "can also lead to a sense of professional fulfillment, increased confidence, and greater job satisfaction" underscores its emotional and psychological benefits. This aligns with the findings of Darling-Hammond et al. (2017), who emphasized that PD should not only improve teachers' skills but also contribute to their overall well-being and professional satisfaction. Additionally, teachers emphasized that PD provides practical tools and strategies that can be immediately applied in the classroom. This focus on practical application aligns with the literature on effective PD, which emphasizes PD activities directly relevant to teachers' day-to-day challenges (Guskey, 2000; Darling-Hammond et al., 2017). Teachers appreciate PD programs that are not only informative but also offer actionable strategies they can implement immediately in their classrooms.

Lastly, teachers highlighted the mandatory nature of PD activities in Benin's educational system. While teachers recognized the importance of PD, they also expressed that the compulsory nature of PD programs sometimes led to participation out of obligation rather than intrinsic motivation. This reality presents a challenge, as it may affect teachers' engagement with PD activities. Despite this, teachers acknowledged that these programs, even if mandatory, helped them improve their teaching practices and meet the professional standards set by the Ministry of Education.

Conclusion

The findings of this study suggest that EFL teachers in Benin view professional development as a vital and ongoing process that enhances their skills, improves their teaching performance, and contributes to better student outcomes. Teachers appreciate the opportunities for reflection, collaboration, and the acquisition of practical teaching strategies. However, the mandatory nature of PD programs and the challenges of limited resources and heavy teaching loads highlight barriers to fully realizing their potential. By understanding teachers' perceptions of PD and the factors that influence its effectiveness, this study provides valuable insights into the design and implementation of professional development programs that can better support EFL teachers in Benin and similar educational contexts. This study enhances the literature on teacher professional development by integrating Guskey's Model of Teacher Change (2002) and Schön's Reflective Practice Theory (1983). Guskey's model connects PD to changes in teaching practices and student outcomes, while Schön emphasizes the importance of reflection in professional growth. This research expands these theories by examining how PD programs in Benin's EFL context foster teacher development and improve student learning outcomes. This study offers practical recommendations to improve PD programs in Benin, emphasizing the need for sustained, collaborative, and contextually relevant activities. It highlights the importance of ongoing support, resources, and teacher involvement in PD, suggesting a shift toward more reflective, practical, and peer-supported learning environments. The findings have broader implications for similar educational contexts in Sub-Saharan Africa, where enhancing teacher development is essential for improving educational quality and student outcomes.

Implications of the Study

This study offers several valuable implications for improving professional development (PD) programs for English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers in Benin and, potentially, in other Sub-Saharan African contexts. By examining EFL teachers' perceptions of PD programs, the study highlights the direct impact of PD on teaching practices, classroom management, teacher confidence, and, ultimately, student learning outcomes. The findings suggest that when PD programs are designed effectively, they can significantly improve teaching practices and foster teacher growth.

The study also underscores the importance of continuous, reflective practice in the teaching profession. Teachers expressed the value of ongoing PD that facilitates reflection, enhances pedagogical skills, and promotes career growth. This aligns with contemporary educational theories such as Guskey's Model of Teacher Change (2002) and Schön's Reflective Practice Theory (1983), both of which emphasize the need for teachers to engage in ongoing professional learning to achieve sustained improvement in teaching effectiveness and student achievement. However, the study also highlights several barriers to the full effectiveness of PD in Benin. These include teaching hours for some teachers and inadequate resources, which may lead to a lack of intrinsic motivation among teachers. The findings also suggest that the current PD activities, while beneficial, may lack the depth and continuity necessary for transformative change in teaching practices.

Recommendations

Based on the study's findings, several recommendations can enhance the effectiveness of professional development (PD) programs for EFL teachers in Benin:

- Focus on collaborative learning: PD should encourage peer collaboration, mentoring, and professional learning communities.
- Ensure practical and contextual relevance: Programs should address teachers' specific needs, such as classroom management and adaptation to the competency-based curriculum, and ensure content is directly applicable to Benin's educational context.

- Provide adequate support and resources: PD must be supported with sufficient teaching materials, time, and guidance from experienced mentors, overcoming barriers like heavy teaching loads and limited resources.
- Enhance intrinsic motivation and teacher agency: PD should foster intrinsic motivation by involving teachers in the design and evaluation of programs, empowering them to take ownership of their professional growth.
- Monitor and evaluate PD programs: Regular evaluation is essential to assess their impact on teaching practices, student outcomes, and teacher satisfaction, thereby facilitating continuous improvement.
- Strengthen policy and structural support: Clear policies and dedicated time for PD, along with financial resources, are needed to ensure effective implementation and participation.

By addressing these recommendations, educational authorities in Benin can improve the quality of EFL teaching, leading to better student outcomes and supporting broader educational reforms. These recommendations are also relevant for other Sub-Saharan African countries facing similar challenges in teacher development.

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