EFL Faculty Members' Professional Development: Beliefs and Suggestions

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Abstract: This study investigates the beliefs and suggestions that English as a foreign language (EFL) faculty members at Al Jouf University have about their professional development. Two instruments were used for data collection: a questionnaire and interviews conducted with 46 participants. The findings of the study showed that the faculty members' most common belief focused on creating a new role for EFL faculty members, shifting from transmitters of knowledge to makers of knowledge. On the other hand, the most common suggestion regarded designing programs that focused on EFL language teachers' professional development.

Key words: professional development, beliefs, suggestions

1. Introduction

Faculty members are the main pillars of the learning and teaching process, and one of a university's vital roles is to aid in their development. Francis (1975) defined development as "a process which seeks to modify the attitudes, skills and behaviour of faculty members toward the greater competencies and effectiveness in meeting students' needs, their own needs and the need of institutions" (cited in Miller, 2011, p. 25). Referring to the above definition, the responsibility to improve and develop faculty members should not fall solely to universities, but also to the faculty themselves to identify their learning needs and decide how to develop themselves. Certainly, the development process has begun to shift from domination by institutions to individuals and a more self-directed process.

The ultimate goal of individuals and institutions should not only be to master skills and participate in learning activities, but also to view professional development as lifelong learning. Richards and Farrell (2005) stated that "providing professional development opportunities is a crucial factor for [the] long-term success of teaching programs" (cited in Herzallah, 2011, p. 14). Professional development has become crucial if faculty members are to cope with the rapid global advances in knowledge and technology. Since the role of English language teachers in classrooms has shifted tremendously, the new methods teachers are expected to use may affect their teaching styles. This shift can include knowledge, beliefs, attitudes, understanding, self-awareness and teaching practices (Yurtsever, 2012).

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2. Statement of the Problem

Al Jouf University is an emerging post-secondary educational institution that was established in 2005 by Royal decree. English language is considered to be one of the most important majors at the university. The English Department is responsible for teaching English language courses to all students at the university (both those in general as well as specialised majors). Teaching English here requires that the instructors have extensive knowledge, pursue continuous development and constantly improve their performance through workshops, seminars and publishing research. Professional development is an essential exercise for EFL teachers that involve examining and developing their opinions and beliefs about learning and teaching (Hill, 2005 cited in Zuheer, 2013). In order to develop EFL teachers professionally, Al Jouf University should be aware of the beliefs and suggestions of the EFL teachers about their profession.

3. Significance of the Study

This research is significant because it achieves the following:

(1) Learns about EFL teachers' beliefs about what supports their professional development.

(2) Illustrates EFL teachers' suggestions about what supports their professional development.

(3) Knows EFL teachers' suggestions, which will help decision-makers to recognize new means of professional development.

(4) Helps the English Department to develop plans and programs to develop EFL teachers professionally.

4. Study Objectives

The present study attempts to investigate the beliefs and suggestions of EFL faculty members at Al Jouf University toward professional development in their field.

5. Research Questions

The study attempts to answer the following research questions:

(1) What beliefs do EFL faculty members have about professional development?

(2) What do EFL faculty members suggest to aid their professional development?

(3) How do EFL faculty members view professional development?

6. Literature Review

The concept of professional development has gradually shifted away from the simple idea of training. As Fullan (1999) stated, it includes formal and informal learning experiences that go beyond training (cited in Kim, 2003). For many years, the only forms of professional development available to instructors were workshops or short-term courses that helped them to gain new information about a particular aspect of their work. This kind of training is sometimes unrelated to teachers' work (Villegas-Reimer, 2003).

Numerous studies have attempted to define professional development, and all of them agree that it is a cyclical process that is continual and unremitting; it should begin with planning, then implementation and then conclude with an evaluation. The researcher views professional development as an organised, planned and

developed process aimed at updating the quality and quantity of participants' skills, strategies of teaching and knowledge. Harzallah (2011) defined professional development as "all formal and informal activities teachers do or receive for the sake of her/his service professional growth". On the other hand, Villegas-Reimer (2003, p. 11) considered the development of a person in his or her professional role as a notification of professional development. The National Staff Development Council (2001) described professional development as a comprehensive, sustained and intensive approach to improving teacher effectiveness (Miller, 2011, p. 25). Banks et al. (2001) explained the Association for Science Education's classification system in the areas of professional development in the following list (cited in Shoqaire & Shaaban, 2013):

(1) Subject knowledge and understanding

(2) Development of teaching and assessment skills

(3) Understanding teaching and learning

(4) The wider curriculum and other changes affecting teaching

(5) Management skills: managing people

(6) Management skills: managing yourself and your professional development

Professional development has an impact on the learning process as a whole. Kim (2008) argued that it is the key to raising students' achievement, implementing higher academic standards, improving instruction and creating authentic professional learning communities.

Through professional development, teachers become one of the priorities of education reforms in general, since good teaching methods positively affect students' learning, which is the ultimate educational goal (Underhill, 2004). Thus, improving EFL teachers' performance is very important because EFL teachers develop their opinions and beliefs about learning and teaching based on their own experience of language classrooms and their knowledge of language theories and language-learning psychology. Numerous studies have proven the importance of professional development and its relevance in different fields of learning and self-improvement. Qing (2009) and Ling-Lou (2008) illustrated the impact of reflective practice on the performance of EFL teachers' professional development. Abou Shoqair and Shaban (2013) and Kim (2008) investigated the professional development strategies of EFL teachers. Although the impact of EFL teachers' professional development has been investigated, few studies directly emphasise EFL teachers' professional development in universities.

In the most successful developmental education programs, training and professional development are a priority. The faculty and staff working with students in these programs are supported and encouraged to attend conferences, training institutes and graduate courses. Ju (2000) examined teachers' perceptions of the knowledge and skills needed for EFL teachers' professional development in a large comprehensive university in China. He found that communicative skills were perceived as the most important skills for EFL teachers at Jialan University to have. Raza (2010) showed the impact of continuing professional development on EFL teachers in United Arab Emirates universities.

Teachers should have knowledge of their beliefs because "our belief systems . . . have a filtering effect on our thinking and information processing and play a critical role in shaping both our perceptions and behaviors" (Johnson, 1994, p. 440). According to Johnson, beliefs are hidden within the individual, affecting his or her behaviour and convictions. Zheng (2009, p. 2) defined beliefs as "[a] set of conceptual representations which store general knowledge of objects, people, events, and their characteristic relationships". Freeman (1991) described beliefs as a process for developing a language for talking and thinking about teachers' own practices, questioning the sometimes contradictory beliefs underpinning their practices and taking greater control over their own

professional growth. Vibulphol (2004) investigated Thai pre-service teachers' beliefs about language learning during their practicum teaching. He found beliefs that affected language learning and foreign language aptitude, such as the difficulty of language learning, the nature of language learning, learning and communication strategies, motivations and expectations. Mohamed (2006) explored the relationship between EFL teachers' beliefs, their instructional practices and their professional development. He focused particularly on teaching grammar in Maldivian schools. The results showed that professional development increased their understanding of inductive approaches to grammar instruction, including the following:

(1) Beliefs about foreign language aptitude

(2) Beliefs about the difficulty of language learning

(3) Beliefs about the nature of language learning

(4) Beliefs about learning and communication strategies

(5) Beliefs about motivations and expectation

Simegn (2014) assessed perceptions and practices of EFL teachers' self-initiated professional development. The author found that the teachers had clearly agreed on the need for employing self-initiated professional development. Some of the EFL teachers' perceptions included updating themselves with new ideas and teaching skills, identifying their weaknesses and strengths and engaging in professional development activities. Finally, Igawa (2008) investigated beliefs about professional development of EFL teachers in Japan and Korea. The study revealed several areas where the teachers felt that their professional development could be improved: teaching skills and methods; language improvement; communication of skills; motivation; attending conferences, seminars and workshops; and lifelong education. EFL faculty members' awareness of their beliefs leads them to be aware of their professional development requirements and suggestions.

7. Study Methodology

7.1 Methods

Descriptive analytical methods were used to elicit the data for this study.

7.2 Participants

This study was carried out at Al Jouf University during the 2013 academic year. Forty-six EFL teachers participated, including associate professors, assistant professors, lecturers and administrators who teach and work in the English Department.

7.3 Instruments

This study consisted of two instruments: a questionnaire and interviews. The questionnaire was divided into two parts: EFL faculty members' beliefs and EFL faculty members' suggestions. The researcher prepared the questionnaire, which consisted of 20 questions on a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree". Before administering the questionnaire, some researchers who were interested in the field reviewed it. The interviews used open-ended questions to gather more in-depth information about the EFL faculty members' views about their professional development.

8. Results and Discussion

Table 1   Average, Standard Deviation and VARPA of Faculty Members' Beliefs

Item	Average	S.D.	Number of participants who chose "strongly agree"	Rank	VARPA	Pearson correlation with the number of years of experience
Transforming the role of EFL faculty members from transmitters of knowledge to makers of knowledge	1.065	0.707107	43	1	0.25	0.061
Improving language proficiency	1.130	1.414214	42	2	1	0.118
Reflecting on EFL teaching and learning strategies	1.195	1.414214	39	3	1	-0.136
Raising awareness of EFL educational innovations	1.217	1.414214	38	4	1	0.085
Varying the tools used to assess learners	1.239	1.414214	38	4	1	0.154
Boosting self-confidence	1.304	1.414214	36	5	1	0.126
Being knowledgeable about professional development strategies	1.304	1.414214	36	5	1	0.053
Facilitating the use of technology during teaching	1.326	1.414214	35	6	1	0.157
Supporting EFL faculty members in front of the administration	1.391	1.414214	34	7	1	0.225

As illustrated in Table 1, "Transforming the role of EFL faculty members from transmitters of knowledge to makers of knowledge" ranked first in the number of "strongly agree" responses (43) and had a positive Pearson correlation with the number of years of experience (0.061). On the other hand, "Motivating external and internal incentives" ranked last in the number of "strongly agree" responses (30) and had a negative Pearson correlation with the number of years of experience (0.113).

Table 2   EFL Faculty Members' Suggestions

Item	S.D.	Number of participants who chose "strongly agree"	Rank	VARPA	Pearson correlation with the number of years of experience
Designing programs aimed at EFL language teachers' professional development	1.414214	35	1	1	-0.019
Attending EFL conferences and workshops inside or outside of the country	1.414214	33	2	1	-0.107
Contributing to academic seminars at the university	1.414214	31	3	1	-0.037
Publishing academic and scientific papers in well-known journals	0.707107	31	3	0.25	-0.333
Visiting English-speaking countries	0	31	3	0	-0.302
Encouraging scholarships and facilitating the procedures to apply for and receive them	0.707107	31	3	0.25	-0.333
Forming a teacher's group cluster with colleagues	2.12132	30	4	2.25	-0.035
Interacting with native speakers	2.12132	30	4	2.25	-0.035
Training about recent trends (e.g., action research)	0.707107	28	5	0.25	-0.494
Joining higher study programs	0.707107	28	5	0.25	-0.494

As shown in Table 2, "Designing programs aimed at EFL language teachers professional development" ranked first in the number of "strongly agree" responses (35) and had a negative Pearson correlation with the number of years of experience (-0.019). Conversely, "Training about recent trends (e.g., action research)" and "Joining higher study programs" ranked last in the number of "strongly agree" responses (28) and had negative Pearson correlations with the number of years of experience (-0.494).

The study results focus on two important dimensions: beliefs and suggestions. Regarding the EFL faculty members' beliefs, the researcher found that the majority of the EFL faculty members believed in the impact of changing their role from transmitters of knowledge to makers of knowledge. This might cause decision-makers to involve EFL faculty members in setting plans, developing curricula and creating teaching methods that allow them to improve themselves professionally and improve the learning process. Guan and Huang (2013) described this transmission as a characteristic of professional development as "a process of refreshing and reshaping teachers existing knowledge, beliefs and morals, and practices and reflections rather than just simply imposing fresh language teaching theories, methodologies and teaching materials on teachers".

In terms of suggestions, "Designing programs aimed at EFL language teachers' professional development" ranked first. In-service programs are very important for professional development, especially when they are selectively designed. This finding agrees with Arikan's (2006, cited in Yurtsever, 2013) work, as he mentioned "embracing the voices, the multiple and contradictory voices of the practitioner to build or reform our teaching and pedagogical practices, including our professional development program is really important". But, designing programs should stem from the needs of teachers — they should not be used as compulsory events by the university. The findings of this study align with Meng and Tajaroensuk's (2013) study. They mentioned that EFL teachers in China were not satisfied with the programs they had attended for their in-service professional development. These programs should encourage teachers' conceptualisations of new learning. In the present study, the majority of the EFL faculty members suggested formal professional development, which would require the university to prepare programs and pay the costs for attending conferences, workshops and seminars. This finding agrees with numerous studies, such as Yoshihara's (2011) and Rokhyat's (2015). Regarding the interviews, the participants were asked about their view of professional development — their views varied. Professionals viewed professional development as a system to attain lifelong learning and a continuous process depending on personal abilities. They also viewed professional development as one of the responsibilities of the person him/herself. Excerpts from the interviews illustrate this feeling.

> "The teacher should take responsibility to engage in continuing professional development to inform his practice, as is one of the codes of professional practice. As a teacher, he needs to do a lot of research by reading relevant books, using the internet, journals, attending training and other relevant sources to update his knowledge".

> "Professional development means a comprehensive, sustained and intensive approach to improving teachers' and principals' effectiveness in raising student achievement. Actually, professional development fosters students' performance".

The majority of the lecturers viewed professional development, represented in workshops, conferences, and scholarships, as tools for their professional improvement:

> "Professional development is something which keeps the teachers in connection with updated knowledge and professional skills, seminars and workshops on different topics should be held to enhance the knowledge of teachers".

On the other hand, the demonstrators had mixed views of professional development and their needs. Most of them viewed professional development as mastering language skills, which expressed their needs as non-native speakers, especially in the beginning of their careers:

> "It's simply the way you may use when you feel that your teaching efforts are not going as you wish. You start thinking about new strategies, approaches and effective methods of teaching. Actually, professional development greatly depends upon self-development, which includes reading, researching, joining workshops . . . etc. It also depends on the beliefs and values that support the individual's perspective. You don't have to be professor to reach the top and meet your aims, but rather, you have to learn constantly what may help you to develop your own teaching skills and competencies".

9. Conclusion

Professional development is a crucial issue for EFL teachers in general and EFL faculty members at universities in particular. Institutions should encourage their employees to be proficient either by formal or informal training and to improve themselves professionally. The faculty members' beliefs and suggestions are relevant to professional development in any aspect of their jobs. Because of the great effect (both negative and positive) of beliefs and suggestions on the behaviours, morals, attitudes, needs and practices of the faculty, the researcher would like to emphasise the university's responsibility in aiding this growth.

10. Recommendations

Based on the findings, the researcher recommends the following:

(1) The EFL Teachers' Centre for Professional Development should serve all of the English teachers both inside and outside the university.

(2) Reduce the tight procedures required to participate in lecturers and to attend conferences and workshops outside the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.

(3) Support in-service training programs.

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