Exploring effective professional development for ESL instructors

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Abstract

Professional development (PD) plays a crucial role in the success and quality of various occupations, including English as a second language (ESL) instruction. However, there is a need to understand ESL teachers' perceptions of PD, the challenges they face, and their recommendations for enhancing the PD process. This study focuses on language schools in Ontario, Canada, where research on the efficacy of PD events for ESL instructors is limited. By utilizing a quantitative research design with a survey-based approach, data were collected from ESL teachers employed in language schools and institutions in Ontario. The findings reveal that while teachers recognize the importance of PD, there is room for improvement in terms of PD topics, activities, and program relevance. The study identified challenges related to time management, lack of relevance, communication and awareness, and technological difficulties. Recommendations include conducting needs assessments, providing incentives and rewards, fostering collaboration, and offering technological support. These findings have implications for language schools in Ontario, as they can use the insights gained to refine their PD offerings and better meet the needs of ESL teachers, thereby improving the quality of English language instruction in the province.

Keywords: ESL teachers, professional development, language schools, perceptions

Introduction

The significance of professionalism and professional development (PD) as fundamental components of success and quality in various occupations has garnered considerable attention in recent decades (Li, 2022). For English as a second language (ESL) instructors, PD is vital in maintaining competencies and

mitigating burnout, stress, and demotivation, particularly among novice teachers (Li, 2022; Vadivel et al., 2021). Research on teacher attrition in Canada suggests that inadequate opportunities for growth and development are among the primary factors contributing to early career teachers leaving the profession (Kushkiev, 2019).

Effective PD initiatives have the potential to enhance personal attributes, in-service teacher education, and reduce professional isolation (Körkkö et al., 2020). As such, understanding ESL teachers' perceptions of PD could help align initiatives with their needs and expectations. However, there seems to be divergent views among teachers and administrators regarding the components of effective teacher professional development (TPD), including its characteristics, practices, scope, and theoretical underpinnings (Komba & Mwakabenga, 2020; McChesney & Aldridge, 2018).

The present study focuses on language schools in Ontario, Canada, where there is a paucity of research examining the efficacy of PD events for ESL instructors. Language schools play a pivotal role in providing language education in Canada and their policies and practices can significantly influence the PD of ESL teachers. Therefore, this study aims to investigate ESL teachers' perceptions of PD opportunities in language schools, the challenges they encounter, and their recommendations for enhancing the PD process. The findings of this study will inform the development of policies and practices that are congruent with the perceptions and needs of ESL teachers and facilitate their ongoing professional development in language schools.

Literature review

Professional development (PD) is crucial for ESL teachers to acquire new knowledge and improve their teaching practices (Borg, 2018; Li, 2022; Vadivel et al., 2021). In Ontario, Canada, ESL teachers in language schools are required to participate in mandatory PD programs (Kushkiev, 2019). This literature review summarizes the existing literature on the effectiveness of PD policies, challenges faced by ESL teachers during PD, and recommendations for enhancing the PD process.

PD policies have been found to positively impact ESL teachers' teaching skills and professional growth (Li, 2022; Vadivel et al., 2021). However, some studies report mixed results, indicating that changes in teaching practices may not always occur (Asih et al., 2022), or that pedagogical content knowledge may not improve significantly (Garet et al., 2016). There is a need to explore ESL teachers' perceptions of PD opportunities in language schools to better understand their experiences.

ESL teachers face challenges such as limited program duration, networking opportunities, seating arrangements, and instructions from facilitators (Vadivel et al., 2021). Other challenges include time

constraints, lack of administrative support, lack of relevance to teachers' needs and interests, and insufficient access to high-quality PD programs (Borg, 2018; Dorgan & Adams, 2020; Schneider, 2020; Szelei et al., 2019). Further research is needed to examine challenges specific to ESL teachers in language schools.

To enhance the effectiveness of PD programs, recommendations include tailoring programs to teachers' needs and involving teachers in program planning (Vadivel et al., 2021). Combining theoretical input with practical activities, fostering collaboration between coordinators and teacher trainers, and creating communities of practice are also suggested (Derakhshan et al., 2020; Vadivel et al., 2021). Additionally, interactive PD models, bottom-up approaches, and providing instructional resources and continuous support are recommended (Buendia & Macias, 2019; Derakhshan et al., 2020). This study aims to address the gap in understanding ESL teachers' perceptions of PD opportunities in language schools. The research questions are as follows:

1. What are the perceptions of ESL teachers in language schools in Ontario, Canada regarding the effectiveness of PD policies?

2. What challenges do ESL teachers in language schools in Ontario encounter when participating in PD opportunities?

3. What recommendations do ESL teachers in language schools in Ontario have for enhancing the PD process?

Method

The study utilized a quantitative research design with a survey-based approach. The use of a survey allowed for the collection of both quantitative and qualitative data, providing a comprehensive understanding of the topic under investigation. The instrument used in this study consisted of an online questionnaire that was administered to ESL teachers in language schools and institutions in Ontario, Canada. The questionnaire was created using Google Forms, a user-friendly online survey platform. It was shared with participants via LinkedIn, utilizing their profiles as a means of reaching out to ESL teachers in the target population.

The participants consisted of ESL teachers employed in language schools and institutions within the province of Ontario. The questionnaire consisted of three parts. Part A collected demographic information with 9 items. Part B included 24 items that focused on ESL teachers' perceptions of professional development. Part C consisted of 3 items that explored the perceived challenges to professional development and recommendations for improvement. The questionnaire was adapted from two previous studies: Continuous Professional Development of English Language Teachers: Perception and Practices by AbdulRahman Al

Asmari and An Investigation into Turkish English Language Teachers' Perceived Professional Development Needs, Practices, and Challenges by Sibel Korkmazgil. The adoption of these questionnaires added to the validity and reliability of the study.

The questionnaire included closed-ended questions with Likert-scale response options to gather quantitative data on teachers' perceptions of PD events, the challenges they encountered, and their recommendations for enhancing the PD process. Open-ended questions were also included to allow for more detailed responses. The inclusion of both closed-ended and open-ended questions provided a comprehensive understanding of ESL teachers' experiences with professional development.

Results and discussion

Demographic information

The majority of respondents identified as female (88.9%), while a smaller proportion identified as male (11.1%). The participants' ages in the study varied from 34 to 57, with a mean age of 43. The participants reported attending a range of educational institutions, including Algonquin College, Carleton University, University of Saskatchewan, University of Ottawa, Yorkville University, Conestoga College, University of Guelph, Sheridan College, University of Massachusetts, and Azad University. Regarding educational attainment, 66.7% held a Master's degree, 11.1% held a Bachelor's degree, 11.1% held a PhD, and 11.1% held a graduate diploma. The respondents reported varying years of teaching experience, ranging from 1 year to 20 years.

Regarding the frequency of PD events at the participants' institutions, the responses revealed the following distribution: 33.3% reported that PD events were held semi-annually, 22.2% indicated a quarterly frequency, 11.1% reported monthly events, 11.1% indicated weekly events, and 22.2% mentioned other frequency, which was not specified.

Teachers' perceptions of PD

The second part of the questionnaire was concerned with Teachers' Perceptions of PD. A Likert scale ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree was used to gather responses. The collected data were subsequently analyzed using SPSS. Such scale was used in the questionnaire to specify the level of the agreement or disagreement based on the following criteria:

Table 1. Guidelines of data interpretation

Mean Range	Interpretation
3.68 – 5.00	High degree of agreement
2.34 – 3.67	Moderate degree of agreement
1.00 – 2.33	Low degree of agreement

Table 2. Perceptions regarding PD Events

Statement	Mean
1. PD events are very important for developing my teaching skills.	3.56
2. PD events have covered a wide range of ELT themes (e.g., Assessment and Evaluation, Effective Classroom Strategies for English Language Learners, Incorporating Technology in ESL Instruction, etc.).	3.22
3. The topics chosen for PD events are based on a thorough needs analysis of ESL teachers, ensuring their relevance and effectiveness in addressing their professional development needs.	2.67
4. Activities carried out during PD events are effective.	2.89
5. PD events include a variety of activities designed for adult learners.	2.67
6. PD events provide a chance to learn with and from my colleagues.	3.33
7. PD events include continuous support and follow-up activities.	2.67
8. PD events expect changes in teachers' classroom practices.	2.78
9. PD events provide significant changes in knowledge, skills, attitudes, and beliefs of participants.	2.56
10. The learning atmosphere of PD activities is collaborative, informal, and respectful.	3.33
11. Event coordinators/presenters are knowledgeable and have credibility with the participants.	3.11
12. All PD activities include theory, demonstration, practice with feedback, and coaching.	2.56
13. There are opportunities for ESL teachers to share their own expertise and experiences during PD events.	3.33
14. PD events encourage ESL teachers to engage in ongoing professional growth and development beyond the required sessions.	3.1
15. The administration of the language school where I work is supportive and facilitates ESL teachers' participation in professional development activities.	2.89
16. Event coordinators/presenters encourage and support professional development through incentives and resources.	2.67
17. PD events align well with current trends and emerging technologies in ESL instruction.	3.11
18. Event coordinators/presenters have ongoing discussion groups on professional development issues.	2.67
19. Teachers have regular and equal access to professional development programs.	2.89
20. PD events have both long-term and short-term goals.	3.22
21. PD events incorporate the latest research and best practices in ESL instruction	2.89
22. My professional development needs are met.	2.78
23. I eagerly and regularly participate in non-mandatory PD events, as I am enthusiastic about continuous learning and professional growth.	2.89
24. I also attend PD events organized by other organizations (e.g., TESL Ontario).	3.00

According to the findings from Table 2, which presents the mean scores of teachers' perceptions regarding PD events, it can be observed that teachers generally agree to a moderate extent with the importance of PD events for developing their teaching skills, as indicated by a mean score of 3.56. The perception that PD events cover a wide range of ELT themes also received a moderate level of agreement, with a mean score of 3.22. However, the perception that the topics chosen for PD events are based on a thorough needs analysis of ESL teachers and the perception that activities carried out during PD events are effective received comparatively lower levels of agreement, with mean scores of 2.67 and 2.89, respectively. Similarly, the perception that PD events provide continuous support and follow-up activities received a mean score of 2.67. On the positive side, teachers generally agree that PD events provide a chance to learn with and from colleagues (mean score of 3.33) and that the learning atmosphere of PD activities is collaborative, informal, and respectful (mean score of 3.33).

Teachers' perceptions of PD events showed both areas of agreement and differing opinions. The findings indicate a potential gap between teachers' perceived needs and the selection of PD topics. Conducting needs assessments is crucial to ensure the relevance and effectiveness of PD programs. While teachers acknowledge some effective activities, there is room for improvement in designing engaging activities that support their professional growth. Collaboration and peer learning are valued by teachers in the PD process, as they appreciate the opportunity to share experiences and expertise with colleagues. Flexible PD formats and schedules are needed to accommodate teachers' busy schedules. Personalized and relevant PD programs are necessary for ESL teachers. Effective communication and ongoing technological support are crucial for teachers to engage in and adapt to PD.

Perceived challenges to PD and recommendations

The third part of the questionnaire explored Perceived Challenges to PD and Recommendations. Participants were asked to identify the key challenges they encountered in their professional development journey and provide suggestions for improvement. The responses provided valuable insights into the obstacles faced by teachers and offered recommendations to enhance the effectiveness and relevance of PD programs. The data collected in this section were carefully reviewed and analyzed to identify common themes and patterns, enabling a comprehensive understanding of the challenges faced by educators and informing potential strategies for addressing them.

The analysis of participant responses revealed several recurring themes and patterns pertaining to the challenges encountered in professional development and recommendations for enhancing the efficacy of PD programs.

Time management emerged as a prevalent challenge, with participants expressing difficulties in balancing PD activities alongside their teaching commitments. Conflicting schedules and limited time were identified as impediments to active engagement in PD events. Another recurrent theme was the perceived lack of relevance in certain PD events. Participants reported that these events did not align with their specific teaching contexts or failed to address their individual needs. Consequently, they advocated for a more tailored approach, emphasizing the importance of PD activities that cater to the unique requirements of educators.

Communication and awareness were identified as additional challenges. Participants highlighted instances where they were unaware of available PD opportunities or encountered scheduling conflicts that hindered their participation. To address these issues, respondents recommended improved communication channels and increased dissemination of information regarding PD offerings. Moreover, participants expressed a desire for more specialized PD opportunities. They perceived a dearth of events that focused on their specific fields of teaching, and instead observed a greater emphasis on broader educational topics. As such, participants advocated for PD programs that catered to their distinct teaching contexts, thereby facilitating greater relevance and applicability.

Technological challenges were also prominent in the findings. Participants noted the rapid pace of technological advancements and the resulting difficulty in keeping up with these changes. They emphasized the need for PD programs that equip educators with the necessary technological skills and methodological understanding to effectively integrate technology into their teaching practices. In terms of recommendations, participants highlighted the importance of conducting ongoing needs assessments to ensure PD programs align with the specific requirements of teachers. They emphasized the value of multidimensional practice activities that extend beyond theoretical concepts, providing practical strategies that can be readily applied in the classroom.

Furthermore, participants proposed the implementation of incentives and rewards as motivational factors to encourage teacher participation in PD events. Suggestions included modest monetary rewards or other forms of recognition to acknowledge teachers' commitment to professional growth. Collaboration and pragmatism were also emphasized as key aspects of effective PD. Participants emphasized the need for collaborative environments where educators can share their expertise and experiences, fostering an exchange of best practices. They also stressed the importance of pragmatism, with a desire for PD programs that prioritize practical strategies and solutions.

Lastly, respondents highlighted the significance of technological support within PD initiatives. They recommended the inclusion of technology funding and paid training opportunities within existing programs,

facilitating instructors' ability to remain abreast of technological advancements and effectively incorporate them into their teaching practice.

Conclusion

The findings indicate that while teachers recognize the importance of PD events for their professional growth, there are areas for improvement in terms of the selection of PD topics, the effectiveness of activities, and the relevance of PD programs to teachers' specific needs and contexts. The study identified challenges such as time management, lack of relevance, communication and awareness issues, and technological difficulties. The recommendations provided by participants highlight the importance of conducting needs assessments, offering incentives and rewards, fostering collaboration, and providing technological support to enhance the effectiveness and relevance of PD programs.

These findings have implications for language schools and institutions in Ontario, Canada, as they can use the insights gained from this study to refine their PD offerings and better meet the needs of ESL teachers. By addressing the identified challenges and implementing the recommended strategies, professional development programs can be enhanced to support teachers' continuous growth and improve the quality of English language instruction in Ontario.

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Author Bios

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