Attributions to Success and Failure in EFL Teachers' Professional Development in Benin

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the determinants of success and failure in professional development (PD) initiatives for EFL teachers in Abomey-Calavi, Benin. Employing a mixed-methods approach combining questionnaires and semi-structured interviews with 42 English teachers, the research reveals that workshops, though the most prevalent PD format, are largely ineffective. Key barriers include the lack of contextual relevance and strategic planning in PD design, diminished teacher motivation due to limited incentives and excessive workloads, and a notable absence of sustained instructional leadership and supervisory support. These factors collectively weaken the impact of PD and limit its classroom applicability. The study advocates systemic reform through a sustainable, collaborative PD framework tailored to teachers' specific needs. Recommended strategies include transitioning from isolated workshops to ongoing professional learning communities, implementing mentoring and coaching systems, and reinforcing institutional support mechanisms.

Keywords: EFL Teachers, Motivation, Professional Development, Workshops.

INTRODUCTION

Teaching is widely recognized as a demanding profession, requiring sustained productivity, adaptability, and responsiveness to ever-evolving educational challenges. It has become almost impossible to maintain consistently high productivity without ongoing professional learning. Martinez (2017) emphasizes that as society and education evolve, so too must the roles and responsibilities of teachers. Language teachers face the dual challenge of adapting to new pedagogical demands while equipping students with the skills needed in a globalized world. This explains why Professional Development (PD) has long been a central theme in educational research and practice. When well-designed, PD experiences not only enrich teachers' knowledge but also translate into improved classroom practices and meaningful learning gains for students (Utami et al., 2019).

In the Beninese context, however, teachers' access to effective PD opportunities remains limited. Although multiple PD strategies exist, they often fail to meet teachers' real needs. A reason for is the fact that supervisors devote much of their time to administrative duties, thereby offering minimal pedagogical support to teachers, who miss opportunities for meaningful supervision and feedback. Moreover, PD initiatives are irregular, fragmented, and lack continuity, leaving many EFL teachers to rely on routine methods that hinder creativity, innovation, and growth in lesson planning and assessment.

Against this backdrop, the present study seeks to critically examine both the successes and shortcomings of teachers' Professional Development in Benin. By doing so, it aims to generate insights for improving PD

programs so that they more effectively support teachers and enhance student learning outcomes. Specifically, the study addresses the following research questions:

1. What are the primary challenges faced by EFL teachers in Benin in accessing and benefiting from Professional Development opportunities?
2. How do EFL teachers in Benin perceive the effectiveness of current Professional Development programs?
3. What models and strategies of Professional Development could be implemented to better support EFL teachers in Benin and enhance educational outcomes?

LITERATURE REVIEW

This literature review explores key aspects of teacher professional development for EFL instructors, focusing on their perceptions of PD, their reported activities, and the successes and difficulties they encounter. These elements are analyzed through the lens of Desimone's core conceptual framework.

Desimone Core Conceptual Framework for Teacher PD

This investigation is guided by Desimone (2009) Core Conceptual Framework for Teacher Professional Development (PD). This framework provides a robust lens for analyzing the effectiveness of PD initiatives by identifying the interconnected factors that lead to changes in teacher practice and, ultimately, student achievement. The framework posits a logical chain of effects that will be used to structure the analysis of the data collected from EFL teachers in Abomey-Calavi:

PD Features

This component focuses on the characteristics of the PD activities themselves. The current investigation examines the features of workshops such as the following:

- **Content Focus** for relevance to the specific needs of EFL teachers.
- **Active Learning** to ascertain that activities require teachers to be active participants rather than passive listeners.
- **Coherence for** alignment with the teachers' existing knowledge, school goals, and national standards.
- **Duration:** to check if the activities are of sufficient length to allow for meaningful learning and practice.

This features offer a consistent benchmark to analyze the challenges and the achievement of Beninese EFL teachers PD for effective assessment of their outcomes.

Teacher Outcomes

This component looks at the direct results of PD on the teachers. The study assesses changes in the following areas:

- **Knowledge and Skills:** What new knowledge or skills did teachers acquire?
- **Attitudes and Beliefs:** Did the PD change their beliefs about teaching and learning?
- **Self-Efficacy:** Did the PD increase their confidence in implementing new strategies?

The analysis then explores how the identified challenges—such as low participation and lack of supervisory support hinder these crucial outcomes.

Contextual Factors

This element recognizes that the environment in which PD occurs is critical. The investigation will explore the influence of the following factors, which emerged as significant challenges in the preliminary findings:

- **School Leadership:** The role of supervisors in providing classroom visits and support.

- **Professional Community:** The degree of collaboration and support among teachers.
- **Policy and Resources:** The availability of PD programs and funding at the district and school levels.

By using Desimone's framework, the study will move beyond a simple description of challenges to provide a nuanced explanation of how and why professional development efforts are succeeding or failing for EFL teachers in this specific context. This approach will provide a clearer, more actionable foundation for future recommendations.

Teachers' Perception of Professional Development

Perceptions, a key component of cognition, are recognized as "a legitimate and indispensable form of teacher knowledge" (Utami et al., 2019). These authors further argue that research isolating Continuing Professional Development (CPD) from the perception-practice relationship presents a fragmented view of reality.

Linguists and educators perceive professional development in various ways. Alibakhshi and Dehvari (2015) define it as a process favoring skills development, continuous learning, staying current in the field, learning for interest, and professional revitalization. Similarly, Afshar and Ghasemi (2018) found that "Iranian EFL teachers perceived PD mainly as a course to boost their knowledge of teaching methodology, to generate useful ideas for improving student outcomes, and to understand their own and their colleagues' strengths and weaknesses" (p. 201). This view positions PD not merely as a means of revitalization but as a core element of teacher professionalism (Evans, 2002; Jafri, 2009).

The necessity for EFL teachers to engage in ongoing improvement is widely acknowledged. As Tabatabaee Yazdi et al. (2018) contend, teachers must be sufficiently knowledgeable to assist learners effectively and contribute to school efficiency. This necessitates constant institutional and policy support for continuous learning, which is the foundation of teacher CPD.

However, perceptions of PD are not universally positive. In contrast to the above, Akcan (2016) reports that pre-service teachers often complain that professional preparation courses overemphasize theory at the expense of practical application. This sentiment is echoed in Yates's (2007) study, which identified two primary factors shaping teacher perceptions of PD. The first factor is professional renewal, where teachers report learning new ideas, improving their teaching skills, and feeling motivated to implement new strategies. The second factor concerns practical applicability; some teachers believe the ideas presented in PD sessions are too difficult to implement, while others dismiss PD as a waste of time.

Professional Development Activities

The literature describes a wide array of PD activities. It is important to note that PD strategies are often synonymous with activities in this context. Richards and Farrell (2005, as cited in Ozsoy, 2017) enumerate common activities, presented in table1.

Table 1: Activities for Professional Development

Individual	**One-to-one**	**Group-based**	**Institutional**
• Self-monitoring • Journal writing • Critical incidents • Teaching portfolios • Action research	• Peer coaching • Peer observation • Critical friendships • Action research • Critical incidents •Team teaching	• Case studies • Action research • Journal writing • Teacher support groups	· Workshops · Action research · Teacher support groups

(Richards & Farrell, 2005 quoted by Özsoy 2017 P. 15)

these activities are categorized based on their mode of implementation, whether they can be conducted individually, collaboratively with a colleague, in groups, or in response to institutional mandates. As illustrated in the subsequent table, many activities can be employed in multiple modes.

Individual Activities of Professional Development

Individual professional development activities refer to self-directed efforts in which teachers assume responsibility for setting goals and managing their own learning (Richards & Farrell, 2005, as cited in Joshi et al., 2018). These activities are characterized by autonomy and self-regulation. Common examples include self-monitoring, reflective teaching, maintaining reflective logs or journals, pursuing self-study, developing teaching portfolios, enrolling in higher degree programs or online courses, and participating in refresher courses (Joshi et al., 2018; Ozsoy, 2017).

One-to-One Activities of Professional Development

One-to-one activities involve collaborative efforts between two educators aimed at mutual professional growth. According to Joshi et al. (2018), these activities emphasize shared goals, collaborative problem-solving, and learning from colleagues. Key examples include peer observation, peer coaching, team teaching, and mentoring. These practices align closely with those identified by Ozsoy (2017), highlighting their recognized importance in teacher development.

Group-Based Activities

Group-based activities involve collective participation and are designed to foster collaborative learning among educators. Like one-to-one activities, they aim to enhance individual and institutional capacity through shared responsibilities (Joshi et al., 2018). Typical group-based activities include teacher support groups, action research, analysis of critical incidents, case analysis, and team teaching.

Institutional Activities of Professional Development

Institutional activities are structured, organization-led initiatives intended to support the continuous growth of both teachers and the institution. These often include job-embedded learning approaches such as workshops, seminars, and conferences (Joshi et al., 2018). Ozsoy (2017) further emphasizes the role of teacher support groups within this category. It is worth noting that not all scholars adopt this classification; for instance, Mizell (2010) does not categorize professional development activities into groups. Nevertheless, the frameworks proposed by Joshi (2018) and Ozsoy (2017) align well with the goals of the current research.

Teachers' Success in Professional Development

Effective professional development has been shown to contribute significantly to teacher growth and instructional improvement. For example, Yalcin (2018) found that lesson study provides Turkish teachers with practical examples that enhance their learning. Similarly, Mansooreh et al. (2017) demonstrated that peer observation significantly supports the professional development of Iranian EFL teachers by fostering reflection. Lanmantchion (2013) identified key factors in high-achieving educational systems, including:

- Dedicated time for professional learning, integrated into teachers' schedules,
- Comprehensive mentoring and induction programs for beginning teachers,
- Opportunities for teacher involvement in school decision-making,
- Substantial government support for professional development.

In these contexts, teachers are more likely to observe peers in other schools, collaborate on instructional issues, and engage in collaborative research. Classroom observation is recognized as a powerful strategy for professional growth.

Challenges of Teachers' Professional Development

Implementing effective professional development faces numerous obstacles across contexts. Common challenges include:

- **Mismatch between PD and Teacher Needs:** Activities often fail to address teachers' actual needs or classroom realities (Ajani, 2018; Galaczi et al., 2018).
- **Inequitable Access:** Selection processes for PD opportunities can be influenced by favoritism or nepotism, excluding many teachers (Ajani, 2018).
- **Limited Transfer to Practice:** Teachers often struggle to apply PD content in their classrooms due to resistance to change, lack of motivation, or contextual constraints (Ajani, 2018; Darling-Hammond et al., 2017).
- **Systemic Barriers:** These include insufficient time, rigid curriculum requirements, lack of tailored support for diverse learners, and inadequate resources (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017).

Tooley and Connally (2016) further highlight four areas requiring improvement:

1. **Needs Assessment:** PD is often planned without a clear understanding of teacher needs or a shared vision of effective teaching.
2. **Selection of Effective Models:** Despite evidence supporting collaborative and sustained PD, one-off workshops remain common due to logistical ease and outdated policy requirements.
3. **Implementation Quality:** Even evidence-based models (e.g., coaching) often fail due to poor execution and lack of support.
4. **Evaluation:** Many institutions lack systems to assess the impact of PD, making it difficult to refine and improve offerings.

To address these challenges, teachers require dedicated time for planning, collaboration, action research, and peer feedback (Glatthorn & Fox, 1996).

METHODOLOGY OF STUDY

Research Design:

The current study was conducted through mixed method research based on the use of interviews and questionnaire which were addressed to a sample of teachers in Atlantique region. Descriptive analysis methods are used to describe and analyze the information obtained from the survey to explore the teachers' opinions. For Brown & Rodgers (2002), quoted by Mawdud & Kavlu (2020: 196), Descriptive research is defined as "research that describes a set of characteristics or behaviors in digital form".

Target Population and sampling:

The sample for this mixed-methods study was selected from 42 non-native EFL teachers with at least five years of experience, all teaching in public secondary schools in the Atlantique region. The research used a combination of convenience sampling and purposive sampling.

The convenience sampling method was used for the quantitative phase (the questionnaire), selecting participants based on their easy accessibility and willingness to participate. This was an efficient way to quickly gather initial data from the 42 teachers.

For the qualitative phase (the interviews), the study employed purposive sampling. This method involved intentionally selecting a smaller group of teachers from the initial pool based on specific characteristics to ensure a diverse range of perspectives. This allowed the research to gain a deeper, more nuanced understanding of the factors influencing professional development.

Data Collection:

This study uses 2-phase data collection

Phase 1: Quantitative Data Collection

The primary tool is a structured questionnaire. Official permission was obtained from school principals in the Atlantique region. The questionnaires were distributed to the sampled EFL teachers during their weekly pedagogical workshop. The respondent teachers were given two weeks to complete the questionnaires. The completed forms were collected directly from the teachers. This phase collects quantitative data on teacher demographics, types of PD activities they've participated in, and their perceptions of the effectiveness and challenges of these programs.

Phase 2: Qualitative Data Collection

Ten EFL teachers with varied experience and PD participation selected ten from the initial group who completed the questionnaire were Contacted to schedule a convenient time and private location for the interview. The interviews, which last approximately 30-45 minutes each. A semi-structured guide was employed to ensure all key topics are covered while allowing for follow-up questions to explore emergent themes. With permission, all interviews should be audio-recorded for accurate transcription. This phase yield rich qualitative data, providing deeper insights into the specific challenges, successes, and personal experiences with professional development. This will help explain the "why" behind the quantitative findings.

Procedures of Data Analysis

Interviews were transcribed promptly using pseudonyms to ensure anonymity. All data—including audio files, transcripts, and questionnaires—were securely stored on a password-protected computer and deleted after the study, following ethical guidelines. Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics to identify trends, while qualitative data underwent thematic analysis to uncover recurring themes. Findings from both methods were integrated to provide a comprehensive understanding of the professional development initiatives.

RESULTS

This section deals with the presentation of the results and the discussion.

Presentation of the Results

In this section, individual interview data are analyzed under each research question. Some of the findings are illustrated by quotations from interviewees. To illustrate the number of interviewees who held similar views, we grouped individual interviewees.

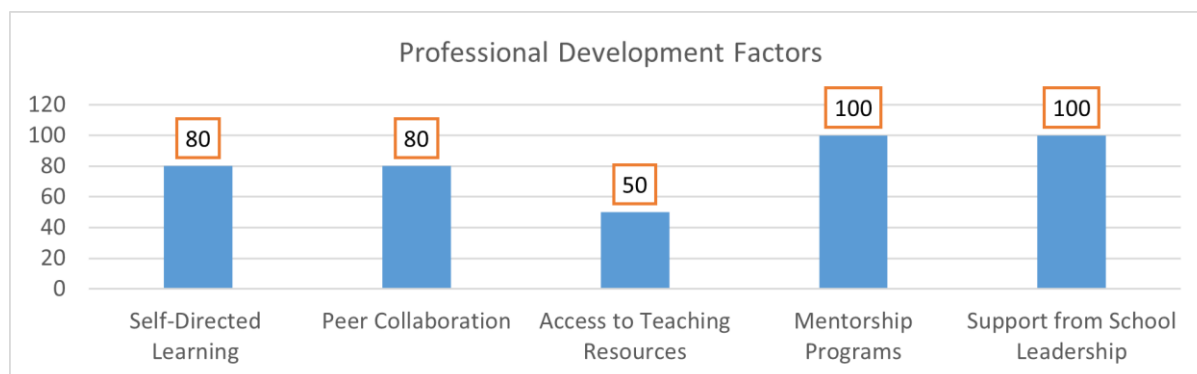**Teachers' Perception of Professional Development**

Figure 1: Professional Development (PD) factors

Figure 1: Highlights that teachers overwhelmingly view Mentorship Programs and Support from School Leadership as the most crucial elements for their professional growth, both rated at a perfect 100%. This is followed by a high value placed on Self-Directed Learning and Peer Collaboration, both at 80%. The chart also reveals that Access to Teaching Resources is considered the least important factor, rated at 50%.
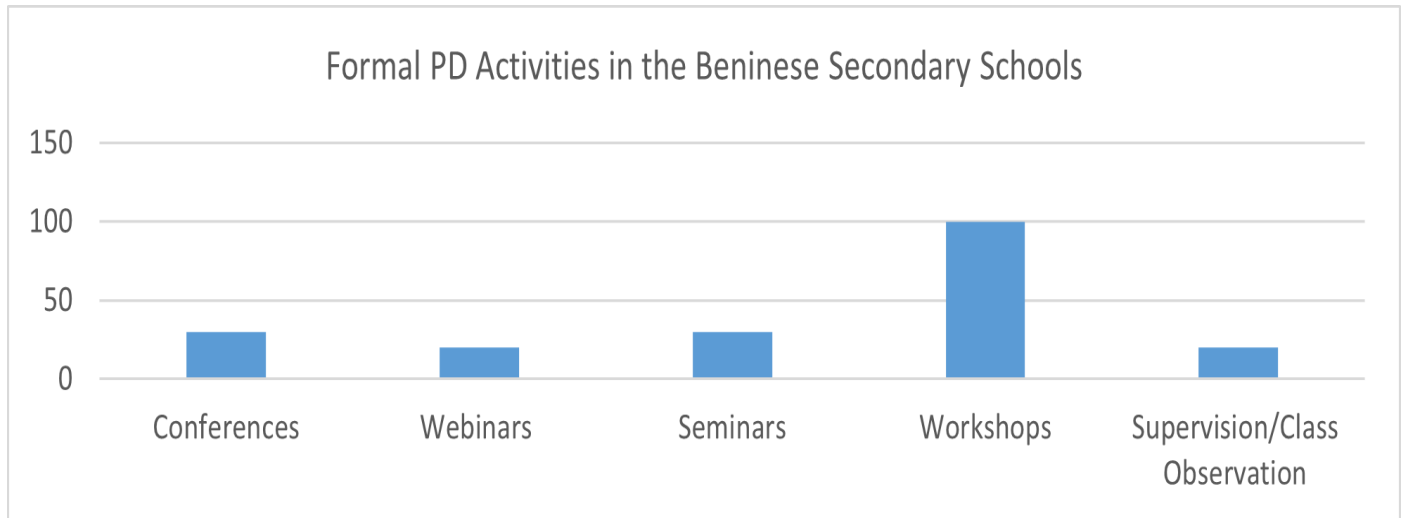
Institutional PD Activities

Figure 2: Formal PD Activities in the Beninese Secondary Schools

Figure 2 shows that workshops are by far the most dominant form of professional development (100%), more than three times the frequency of any other activity. Conferences and seminars are moderately represented (30%), indicating a balanced but limited engagement in structured, formal learning events. Webinars and supervision/class observation both show the lowest participation, with only about 20 instances each.
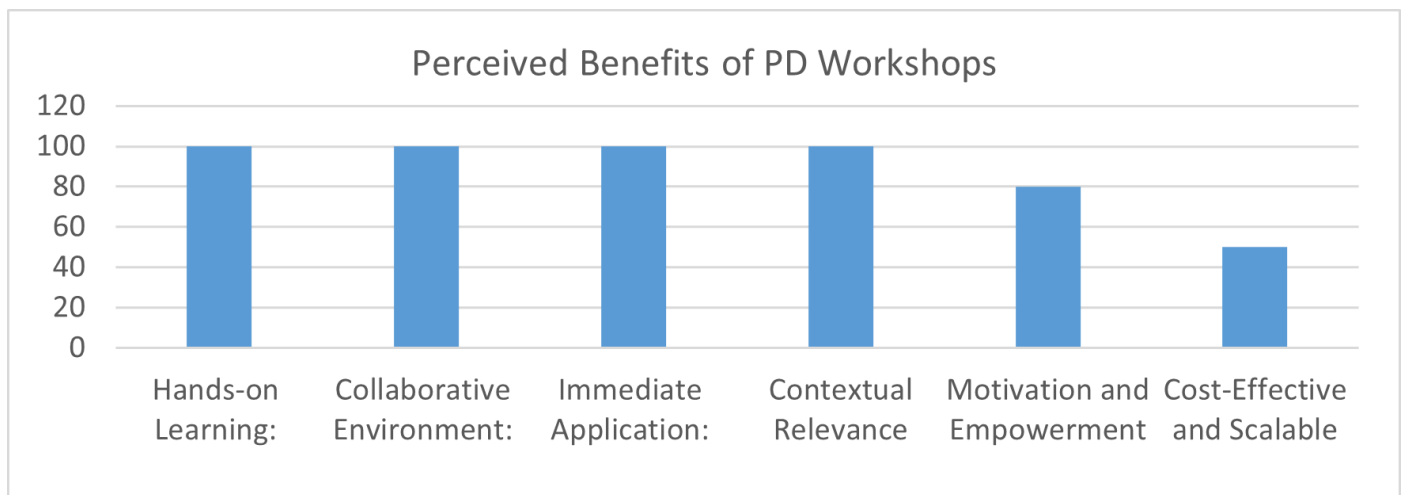
Perceived Benefits of PD Workshops

Figure 3: Perceived Benefits of PD Workshops

Figure 3 highlights that Hands-on Learning, a Collaborative Environment, the opportunity for Immediate Application, and Contextual Relevance are all seen as highly beneficial, with each receiving a 100% rating. In contrast, Motivation and Empowerment are seen as less important, with a score of 80%, while Cost-Effective and Scalable is considered the least important benefit, with a score Peer only 50%.

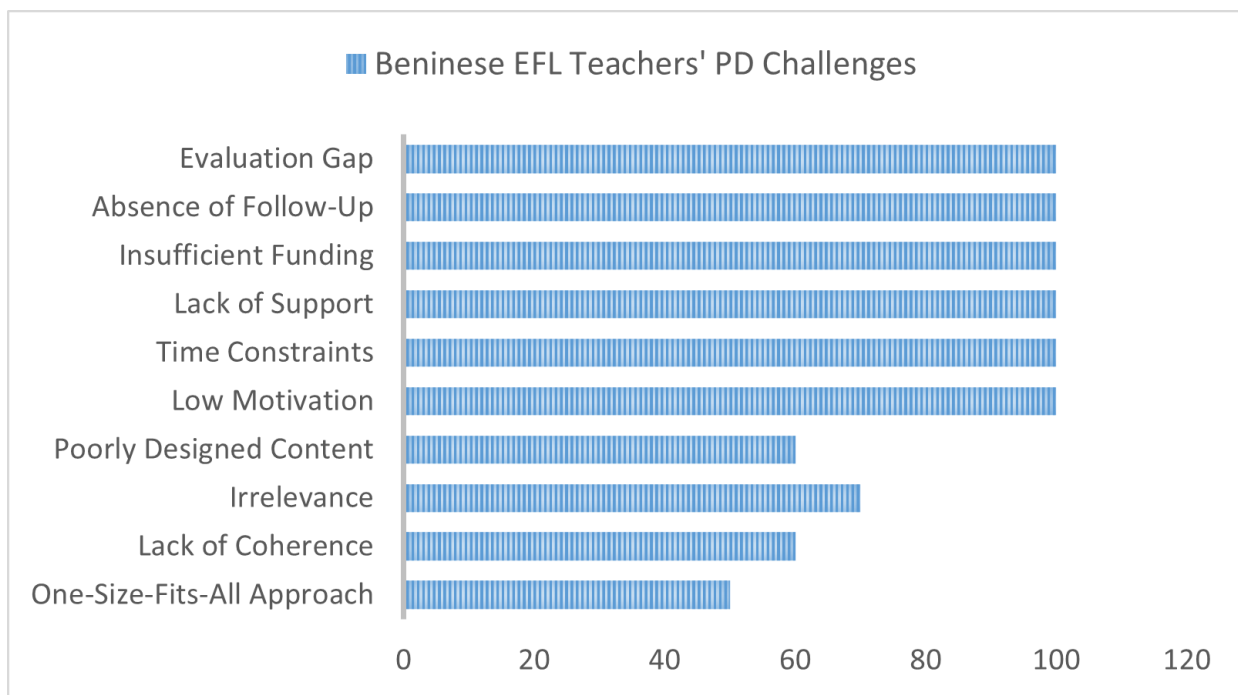**Teachers' challenges for their Professional Development**

Figure 4: Teachers' challenges for their Professional Development

Figure 4 reveals that the primary obstacles to effective professional development are not issues with content, but rather with the overarching system. The most severe challenges, all rated at 100%, are systemic and institutional, including a significant evaluation gap, the absence of follow-up, insufficient funding, and a general lack of support. These findings suggest that while PD programs may exist, their effectiveness is severely undermined by a lack of institutional backing and resources. The chart also shows that challenges related to the design and relevance of PD are less critical, indicating that the main problem lies in the supportive framework, not the training itself.

Interview Report on Professional Development

This section presents the results of semi-structured interviews conducted with secondary school teachers. The interviews explored the perceptions, implementation, challenges, and impacts of Professional Development (PD). Findings are thematically organized and supported with illustrative quotations from respondents.

Teachers' Perception of PD

Teachers consistently emphasized the importance of mentorship and school leadership as central to their professional growth. Every interviewee affirmed that guidance from experienced mentors and strong leadership support are critical for effective PD.

"Without the guidance of experienced mentors and supportive principals, workshops or training alone cannot really change how we teach." (Interviewee 5)

In addition, most teachers value self-directed learning and peer collaboration, highlighting the need for autonomy and collegiality. Access to resources, however, was deemed less essential, with some respondents noting: "You may give me books or digital tools, but if I don't have someone to guide me, it won't help much." (Interviewee 2)

Teachers view PD as human-centered and relational, prioritizing mentorship and collaboration over material access.

Implementation of PD Activities

Workshops were identified as the dominant institutional PD activity, with nearly all participants recalling repeated workshop experiences. One respondent explained: "We attend workshops regularly. They are practical and usually compulsory, so everyone benefits from them." (Interviewee 7)

Conferences and seminars were less common , while webinars and supervision/class observation were rare . The findings suggest that digital and peer-based PD practices remain underutilized in Beninese secondary schools, despite their potential to complement workshops.

Impact and Perceived Benefits of PD

Teachers strongly agreed that workshops are effective when they emphasize hands-on learning, collaboration, immediate application, and contextual relevance—each factor receiving 100% endorsement. "What I learn today, I want to use tomorrow in my classroom. That is what makes a workshop meaningful." (Interviewee 1)

Secondary benefits, such as motivation and empowerment, were less emphasized, while cost-effectiveness and scalability were the least valued. Teachers prioritize practical applicability and contextual fit over logistical or motivational dimensions.

Challenges to Effective PD

All interviewees (100%) pointed to **systemic and institutional barriers** as the major challenges to PD. The most severe obstacles include the Lack of follow-up after training the Absence of evaluation mechanisms the Insufficient funding, and Weak institutional support

"After a training, nobody checks how we are using what we learned. No follow-up, no evaluation, nothing." (Interviewee 9). "The problem is not the training itself; it is the system that does not support us afterward." (Interviewee 3)

By contrast, issues related to content design or training relevance were seen as less critical. PD in Beninese secondary schools suffers not from poor content but from weak systemic support.

The interviews reveal workshops dominate implementation, but digital/peer-driven models remain underdeveloped. The interviewees perceive mentorship and leadership as the cornerstones of PD and consider practical, hands-on approaches to have the greatest impact. They posit that Systemic failures, funding, follow-up, and evaluation undermine the sustainability of PD programs.

Discussion

This section interprets the findings to provide a deeper understanding of the state of professional development for EFL teachers in Beninese secondary schools.

Teachers' Perception of Professional Development

The results clearly indicate that Beninese EFL teachers perceive human-centric and structural support as the most crucial element of effective PD. The 100% valuation of Mentorship Programs and Support from School Leadership aligns perfectly Jafri (2009) defined PD as a core element of professionalism that involves revitalization and growth, which is impossible without supportive leadership and guidance. This finding also echoed Lanmantchion's (2013) identification of "comprehensive mentoring" and "government support" as hallmarks of high-achieving educational systems.

The high value placed on Self-Directed Learning and Peer Collaboration (80%) supports the framework proposed by Richards and Farrell (2005, as cited in Ozsoy, 2017), who categorized these as vital individual

and one-to-one activities. This shows that while teachers crave guidance, they also highly value autonomy and collaborative learning with colleagues. The lower importance placed on Access to Teaching Resources (50%) is particularly insightful. It suggests that in the Beninese context, the primary barrier to improvement is not a lack of materials but a lack of human support systems.

Institutional PD Activities and Their Impact

The overwhelming dominance of workshops (100%) as the primary PD activity confirms a global trend noted by Tooley and Connally (2016). While teachers reported these workshops to be beneficial when they are practical and hands-on, their near-total reliance indicates a significant gap in the PD model. The very low incidence of webinars and supervision/class observation (20% each) reveals a stark underutilization of the very activities teachers find most valuable: mentorship and peer collaboration.

This misalignment between what is provided (workshops) and what is needed (ongoing, collaborative support like observation and coaching) is a critical finding. It reflects non-grouped view of PD, emphasizing that a singular focus on one format is ineffective. The high value teachers place on Immediate Application and Contextual Relevance (100%) in workshops directly addresses the concern raised by Ajani (2018) that PD is often "inappropriate for the instructional tasks required in the classroom." Beninese teachers are clearly stating that for PD to be effective, it must be directly applicable to their specific teaching reality.

Challenges for Professional Development

The results on challenges are perhaps the most conclusive. The identification of evaluation gap, absence of follow-up, insufficient funding, and lack of support (all 100%) as the primary obstacles directly validates and prioritizes the challenges outlined in the literature. The overwhelming identification of systemic challenges including evaluation gaps, lack of follow-up, insufficient funding, and inadequate support reveals that the core problem lies not in workshop content but in the deficient strategic framework governing professional development. Beninese EFL teachers are trapped in a system reliant on isolated workshops that fundamentally contradict their professional belief that effective development requires continuous, collaborative support through mentorship, observation, and sustained follow-up.

This misalignment represents a complete failure to implement a coherent system embodying Desimone's (2009) essential features of effective PD. Consequently, transformative growth requires a fundamental shift from standalone workshops to a system-supported model that reallocates resources toward mentorship programs, embeds follow-up mechanisms, and fosters collaborative learning cultures, as demonstrated in high-achieving systems (Lanmantchion, 2013). Without this systemic transformation, even well-designed workshops will continue to fail.

Effective PD Strategies in Beninese EFL teaching

The theoretical foundation of a sustainable professional development plan rests on the principles of continuous learning and relevance. A key aspect is moving beyond one-off workshops to a model of ongoing engagement, such as through communities of practice and peer discussion groups. This approach acknowledges that professional growth is an iterative process, not a singular event. To be truly effective, the content must be contextualized to the specific needs and realities of the professionals, rather than being a one-size-fits-all solution. This ensures that the knowledge and skills gained are directly applicable. Furthermore, the plan should incorporate a variety of learning formats from self-paced individual study to collaborative mentoring and collective seminars to cater to diverse learning styles and promote a holistic approach to skill acquisition. This theoretical framework emphasizes that a successful development plan is dynamic, responsive, and deeply integrated into the professional's daily work life.

From a practical standpoint, implementing such a plan requires a strategic approach to overcome common obstacles. The first step is to engage teachers directly in the process through surveys and co-designing pilot

programs. This co-creation reduces resistance to change and increases buy-in. To ensure smooth operation, it's essential to streamline administration by creating a dedicated unit that can accelerate processes and manage logistics efficiently. Securing funding is another critical practical step, often requiring partnerships to finance basic infrastructure like digital learning platforms. Finally, advocating politically is vital for long-term sustainability. By presenting policymakers with data on the positive impact of professional development, it's possible to secure ongoing support and funding, turning a temporary initiative into a permanent part of an organization's strategy. This practical implementation focuses on building a robust support system around the theoretical principles.

CONCLUSION

The findings from this study confirm that while Beninese EFL teachers have a positive perception of professional development (PD) and actively seek personal growth, the current system presents significant barriers. The over-reliance on a single formal strategy, the workshop, leaves a major gap in teacher development. A critical lack of institutional support, follow-up, and funding not only limits the availability of high-quality PD but also undermines the effectiveness of what is offered.

The research recommends a fundamental shift away from the current fragmented model toward a more strategic and teacher-centered approach. School authorities must play a more active role by providing a greater variety of programs and, importantly, by involving teachers in their design. This collaborative effort will foster a sense of ownership and increase motivation. For teachers, the study emphasizes the importance of continuing to pursue informal learning opportunities to supplement formal training.

Ultimately, the study's findings, while limited by its specific context and small sample size, provide a clear roadmap for future action. They highlight the urgent need for a more robust and supportive framework for teacher development in Benin. Further research involving a larger, more diverse sample of teachers is necessary to confirm and expand upon these conclusions

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