

In-service Training Professional Development Needs of Iranian Teachers of English as Foreign Language: A Qualitative Research Study

Goudarz Alibakhshi¹

Assistant professor, Allameh Tabataba'i University

Abstract

Teachers' perceptions of continuing professional development and the activities which they undertake to develop professionally have been investigated in different contexts. This study assessed professional development needs Iranian English as Foreign Language (EFL) teachers. In so doing a qualitative research method was used. Thirteen EFL teachers were selected through convenience sampling. The data were collected through semi-structured interviews with the participants. Data were analyzed through content analysis techniques. Results showed that EFL teachers need 8 types of professional development activities: teaching methods, assessment, curriculum development, educational psychology, educational technology, communication and management skills, language skills, and linguistics and meta-linguistics awareness. Results can be used by pre-service and in-service training program developers, EFL teachers, and language institutes to assess EFL teachers' needs and develop their profession.

Keywords: In-service training, Professional Development, EFL teachers

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1. Introduction

Teacher development has been defined as a consistent cycle of teacher learning which begins with initial/ preservice teacher training and lasts for as long as a teacher may remain in the profession (in-service training). Teaching as a profession persuades teachers and enhances their societal expectations to think of finding ways to improve and contribute to the students' academic outcomes

¹ Corresponding author: alibakhshi@atu.ac.ir

(Bailey, Curtis, & Nunan, 2001; Castle, 2006; Murray, 2010). It has also argued that, to be an effective teacher, teachers need a combination of professional knowledge and specialized skills as well as their own personal qualities and experiences. Moreover, acquiring new skills and adding to their knowledge are among the major reasons teachers endeavor to attend activities designed for professional development (Bailey, Curtis, & Nunan, 2001). According to Murray (2010), learning about new techniques and ways to empower teachers in English language teaching seems to be both motivating and encouraging for both an experienced and a novice teacher. Like the teachers of the other fields, English language teaching experts believe that ongoing professional development is of much significance, particularly in today's rapidly, constantly, and technologically changing world. Teachers of English as a foreign language are more likely to try the recent innovations in language teaching theories and educational technology with their students (Chisman & Crandall, 2007). As Day and Sachs (2004) argue, the term Continuing Professional Development (CPD) implies all the activities teachers engage in during the course of a career to enhance their work. Such activities as Kelly (2006) believe, are intended to result in a process, on-going teacher learning, through which teachers become experts.

Teacher professional learning is a fairly complex process that requires teachers' emotional and cognitive involvement both collectively and individually, their capacity and willingness to investigate where each one stands (Romano, 2006; Reis-Jorge, 2007). Teachers' professional development has been studied and presented in the relevant literature in different ways (Craft, 2000; Kelly, 2006; Mann, 2005; Roberts, 1998; Roberts, 1998). But at the center of such attempts, has always been the recognition that professional development is related to teachers' learning, and transforming their knowledge

into practice so that they can contribute to their students' growth (Bolam, 2000).

Teachers' perceptions of CPD and the activities which they undertake to develop professionally have been investigated in different contexts. However, EFL teachers' in-service training professional development needs have not been assessed yet. The present study aimed at assessing professional development needs of Iranian EFL learners. More specifically, the following research question was addressed:

What are the professional development needs of Iranian EFL teachers?

2. Review of the Related Literature

According to Polk (2006), a noteworthy part of instructing ought to be that of learning. It is obvious that teaching and learning coincide with each other hence, the discussion of teaching proceeds the discussion of learning. What is here and there is the response that definitely ties teaching and learning together that is, in addition to the fact that teachers teach and students learn, teachers must learn similarly as the students do. It is a must for teachers to consistently learn new knowledge, and persistently advance as experts (Polk, 2006). Understood in these few sentences is the essence of what is designated "proficient development" that is considered not only a need but a must for successful teaching.

As indicated by Stout (1996), professional development– now and again called proceeding with instruction, in-benefit preparing, or staff improvement – can be described as a focal device for altering educator practices. The progression by attempt of people who work as expert, enable them to participate in activities which will give the chance to 1) keeping up and refreshing knowledge and skills, 2) accepting a new obligation, 3) recovering the mastery of concepts, and 4) making, foreseeing, and effectively reacting to

changes. Burke (2000) also believes "professional development from a school system's point of view is a planned, comprehensive, and systemic program designed by the system to improve all school personnel's ability to design, implement, and assess productive change in each individual and in the school organization" (p. 29).

What professional development involves and when it can be most appropriate are, as mentioned above, important questions discussed in the literature on the topic. It is often argued in the literature that comprehensive professional development incorporates appropriate instructional techniques and learning experiences for teachers and other staff (Killion, 2002). Comprehensive professional development should (a) adhere to high content standards while providing sufficient time for learning, practicing, and planning for and debriefing implementation; (b) demonstrate pedagogy that reflects current research about teaching and learning; (c) incorporate content-specific knowledge that relates to student experiences and environment; (d) be of sufficient duration to constitute a powerful intervention to alter teachers' behaviours and beliefs; and (e) be part of a long-term intervention to improve the performance

In their extensive review of the research, Drago-Severson (2002), Sparks and Loucks-Horsley (1989), and Marczely (1996) found out that seven discernible models of professional development are used for teachers: (1) in-service training, (2) observation/assessment, (3) development/improvement process, (4) study groups, (5) inquiry/action research, (6) individually guided activities, and (7) mentoring.

3. Method

Participants

The participants of were 30 EFL teachers who were selected through convenience sampling. The rationale for the sample size was data saturation which occurred when the 30th participant was interviewed. The criterion for the inclusion of the participants in the study was teaching experience at language institutes. More experienced and novice EFL teachers were excluded from the study and those with teaching experience range of 7-10 were recruited.

Data Collection

The data of the study were collected in different steps. In the first phase of the study, the sample was selected. Then, each participant was invited to comment on the most important in-service training course which they find important and influential in their professional development. Hence, semi-structured face-to-face individual interviews with open-ended questions was conducted. Semi-structured interviews helped the researcher to explore the most frequently reported PD needs from interviewees' own perspectives with the assumption that reported needs reflect the real intentions of the selected teachers as the informants of the study.

Data Analysis

To analyze the data, content analysis techniques were applied. The semistructured interviews with the informants were conducted in English; the likely difficult technical words associated with professional development were avoided. In order to elicit the informants' in-depth perceptions, the interviewer allowed the conversation to move on smoothly in a more interactive and friendly manner. Each interview consisted of the certain questions which aimed at exploring the main PD needs of the language teachers. Interviews were first transcribed. The transcripts were then read for topic ordering to draw out and list topics linked to the original research questions of the study. A

second careful reading of transcripts helped the researchers identify the explicit and implicit categories which emerge within each topic. The categories were color coded. In case of more than one category in a topic, codes were shown in numbers. The quotes were labeled according to the categories they represented.

4. Results

In this part at first the main categories of PDNs are presented. Then, the sub-categories of each category are listed and explained.

Table 1

Major PDNs of EFL teachers

| | number /percent |
|---|-----------------|
| Teaching methods & Skills | 22 (73.3%) |
| Language development | 21(70%) |
| Linguistics and Metalinguistic awareness | 16 (53.3%) |
| Classroom Management/Communication skills | 15 (50%) |
| Psychological Literacy | 15 (50%) |
| Assessment | 13 (43.3%) |
| Curriculum Development | 13 (43.3%) |
| Educational Technology | 13 (43.3%) |

As it is shown in Table 1, about 73.3% of the participants believed EFL teachers need professional development on teaching methods and skills, 70% believed that need develop their language proficiency and 53.3% believed that they need to learn about linguistics and metalinguistic. The other two professional development needs were coded as classroom management/communication skills and educational psychology literacy. Results also show that EFL teachers need to develop learn about assessment, curriculum development, as well as education psychology.

A. Teaching Skills and Methods

The first and the most frequently reported PDN by the participants of the study was coded as teaching methods and skills. This category consists of six subcategories, which are presented in Table 2.

Table 2

The Subcategories of Teaching Skills and Methods

| | n/percent |
|---|-----------|
| Teaching language skills and sub-skills | 22/ 73.3% |
| Teaching English for communication | 21/70% |
| Effective teaching methods | 20/66% |
| Learner-centered approaches | 17/56/6% |
| Team –teaching/peer-observation | 13/43.3% |
| Learning theories | 13/ 43.3% |

As it is shown in Table 2, teaching skills and methods category consists of 6 subcategories. The first subcategory is teachers' need for developing their profession in terms of teaching language skills and subskills. About 73.3% of the participants believed that need to develop teaching speaking, reading, listening, writing, grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation. The following extracts of the interviews exemplify the theme:

Actually I think I need to attend some workshops on teaching language skills and sub-skills. Or I must read the recently published books on teaching language skills

The second most frequently PDN related to teaching language skills is teaching English for communication. This need was reported by about 70% of the participants. As an example of the participants argued:

As English language books are all communication oriented, I need to learn how to teach English for communication. I am perfect at teaching grammar but I guess I need to learn more about teaching language for communication.

The third extracted theme reported by about 66% of the participants is effective teaching methods. Participants argued that some more effective teaching methods are practiced around the world which they also need to learn. One of the participants argued:

My colleagues who have received certificates from European countries have some effective teaching methods which I think all language teachers must learner.

About 56% of the participants believed that recent changes in language teaching methods are mostly learner-centered. That is, the learners' related factors such as age, attitude, motivation, and needs are highly emphasized. One of the participants argued:

Rapid changes in education purposes and the roles which language learners play in an education system are good stimuli for learning more about learner-centered approaches and methods in teaching English language.

The least reported extracted sub-categories of teaching skills and methods are team teaching/peer observation and learning theories. 53.4% of the participants believed that EFL teachers need to learn more about learning theories underlying teaching methods and skills and team teaching/peer observation. They also argued team teaching/peer observation gives them a good chance to see how the other colleagues teach. The following quotations exemplify the themes:

Teachers' knowledge of learning theories affects their perceptions of teaching and types of activities they use to teach.

B. Linguistics/Metalinguistic

The second category consists of six sub-categories, which are presented in Table 3.

Table 3

The Subcategories of Linguistics/Metalinguistic

| | |
|--------------------------------|-----------|
| English syntax | 13/43.3% |
| semantics | 13/ 43.3% |
| Discourse/pragmatics | 15/ 50% |
| Communication strategies | 17/56.6% |
| Grammatical judgment | 18/ 60% |
| English language styles/ genre | 20/66.6 |

As it seen in Table 3, the linguistics and meta-linguistic needs are classified into 6 subcategories. These subcategories are ranked order form the most important to the least important as: English language styles/genre, grammatical

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judgment, communication strategies, discourse/pragmatics, semantics, and English syntax. As it seen, the most frequently reported professional need is the subcategory of English language styles/ genres which is preceded by grammatical judgments. That is, 20 (66.6%) of the participants believed that they need to take some formal or informal courses on language styles and different genres. Moreover, 18 (60)% of the participants believe that teachers' metalinguistic awareness affects the quality of teaching grammar; therefore, EFL teachers need to be trained in terms of grammatical judgment. The following quotations exemplify the themes:

Familiarities with different genres affect teachers' effective teaching of language skills most particularly writing skill. However, I guess I lack appropriate knowledge of genre analysis

The fourth reported sub-category was communication strategies. Seventeen (56%) of the participants believe that they are not well aware of the most effective communication strategies. Participants believe that effective communication strategies are very necessary for EFL teachers if they want to teach English for communication. The following quotation exemplifies the theme:

I know grammar and enough vocabulary but sometimes I cannot express what I mean I think I have to learn more about communication strategies especially when I am teaching speaking skill to advanced language learners

Next to communication strategies, as it is shown in the above table, is discourse and pragmatics. Fifteen (50%) of the participants believed that they need to refresh their knowledge of pragmatics and discourse analysis most particularly for teaching communication competence. One of the participants stated:

I guess I am not pragmatically competent. Sometimes I write something to native speakers

and they say it is not socially appropriate. So I think I need to learn more on these issues

The last two subcategories of linguistics/metalinguistic category which were reported by the least number of participants are the needs for English semantics and syntax. About 13(37%) of the participants believed that they need to refresh their knowledge of English syntax and semantics.

C. Language improvement

Language development is another professional development need of EFL teachers. Participants of the study stated that in order to teach very effectively, they have to improve their language skills: speaking, reading, listening, and writing. In addition to the language skills, participants stated that two components: pronunciation and accent/intonation were very needed by EFL teachers. The subcategories of language development are presented in Table 4.

Table 4

Subcategories of Language Development

| | |
|---------------------|-----------|
| Speaking | 14/ 46.7% |
| Reading | 14/46.7% |
| Listening | 14/ 46.7% |
| Writing | 14/46.7% |
| Pronunciation | 15/50% |
| Accent & Intonation | 16/53.3% |

As it is seen in the above table, about 53.3% of the participants believed they need to develop their English accent and intonation, 50% believed that they need to improve their pronunciation and about 47% believed that they need to improve all language skills. The following extracts from the interviews illustrate the themes:

Foreign languages are easily forgotten if not practiced regularly I am sure EFL teachers need to regularly listen to native speakers..... watch a lot of films in English, read a lot, practice writing, and join speaking club, read some books on intonation and accent, etc.

D. Communication/Management Skills

Another extracted PDN was labeled as communication/management skills.

This category consists of six sub-categories. The subcategories are presented in Table 5.

Table 5

Subcategories of Communication/Management Skills

| | |
|--|-----------|
| Creating relaxed Atmosphere | 18/60% |
| Classroom management strategies/skills | 16/ 53.3% |
| Establishing rapport/empathy with Students | 15/50% |
| Managing the class, time, etc. | 14/ 46.6% |
| Establishing rapport with colleagues | 12/ 40% |

As shown in Table 5, the most frequently reported sub-category is teachers' need for creating relaxed atmosphere. 18 (60%) of the participants believed that EFL teachers need to create relaxed atmosphere in EFL classes so that EFL learners feel relaxed and have no stress and anxiety.

Another extracted subcategory related to communication/management skills is teachers' need for skills to promote students' motivation to learn English language. About 53.3% of participants believed that they need to learn new strategies and techniques to motivate language learners. For instance, one of the participants argued:

The rate of demotivated language learners in my classes is higher than the rate of motivated ones and unmotivated ones do not listen while I am teaching. Therefore, I have to solve this problem through learning some motivational strategies

Establishing rapport and empathy with the students is another category related to management and communication skills. About 15(50%) of the teachers believe that effective teaching happens when teachers can build rapport with the students. Participants also argued that empathy is the heart of each classroom culture. That is through empathy, students find out how to understand each other and to build friendly relationships based on trust. One of the participants argued:

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Taking the time to learn how to demonstrate empathy with the students can improve student-teacher relationships at schools and out of the schools.

They also believe that establishing rapport with the present students is not as easy as they expected, although it turned out to be an important factor.

The next PDN as reported by about 14(46.6%) of the participants is teachers' need for developing classroom management skills. Participants believed that EFL teachers most particularly less experienced ones need to receive in-service training courses on effective classroom management skills.

One of the participants argued:

Sometimes I really find myself unable to manage the classrooms, students make noise, some pay no attention to me, and some others disturb the other classmates, and I don't know what to do.

Establishing rapport with colleagues and staff is another need related to the category of communications/management skills. About 40% of the participants argued that building rapport with colleagues and staff of the schools/institutes affects their teaching and professional development. That is, why they need to know how to establish rapport with the colleagues. One of the participants argued:

I started teaching at a language institute where I knew none of the colleagues a couple of years ago. I had no contact with any of themand I had to quit there. If I knew how to establish rapport with the colleagues, I had a better chance of keeping my job there.

E. Psychological Needs

The next type of the professional needs is coded as psychological needs.

The EFL teachers' psychological professional needs are either student-related or teacher-related. The sub-categories of each component are presented in Table 6.

Table 6
Teachers' Psychological Needs

| | | n/Percent |
|-----------------|--------------------------|-----------|
| Student related | Motivation and attitudes | 15/50% |
| | Confidence/ autonomy | 13/43.35 |
| Teacher-related | Self-efficacy | 14/46.3% |
| | Teaching motivation | 15/ 50% |
| | Emotion regulation | 16/53.3% |

As it is shown in Table 6, 15 (50%) of the participants argued they need to learn how to motivate the language learners and change their attitudes towards EFL. One of the participants stated:

If students are motivated and do not have positive attitudes toward English language, they will not make progress, even though they teach very well.

The next type of professional development needs reported by teachers, are teachers needs to improve the students' autonomy. Participants believed that learner-autonomy due to many factors such as class size and teaching time turned out to be very important. Therefore, teachers need to know how to promote learner-autonomy as well as confidence in learning. The following quotations illustrate the themes:

I guess I need to know strategies and hints to promote learners' autonomy and confidence. You know to promote the learners' confidence is somehow a technical concept which needs trained technicians

It can also be seen that as there are three types of psychologically related variables which teachers need to develop: emotion regulation, teaching motivation, and self-efficacy. About 16 (53.3) of the participants believed they need to receive training on emotion regulation and the required strategies. Fifteen (53.3) of the participants believed that they need to maintain their motivation, and 14(46.6%) believed that they need to learn how they increase

their self-efficacy. The following scripts from the interviews with the participants illustrate the theme:

Sometimes I feel I cannot teach well.... I cannot manage the classroom. I think I have to learn some strategies to overcome these negative beliefs maybe through attending workshops or learning some needed books

F. Assessment

Participants argued that they need to develop in four areas of assessment: types of assessment, test development, psychometrics of a test, and test consequences as presented in Table 7.

Table 7
Subcategories of Assessment

| | |
|---------------------|----------|
| Types of assessment | 15/50% |
| Test development | 21/70% |
| Test psychometrics | 20/66% |
| Test consequences | 14/46.3% |

As it is seen in Table 7, 70% of the participants believed that they need to learn how to develop language tests, 66 % stated that they need to know how to estimate the reliability and validity of a language test. About 50% of the participants believed that EFL teachers need to know about different types of language tests such self-assessment, peer-assessment, etc. And about 46.3% of the interviewees argued that they need to know what consequences a test or assessment type might have for the students. The following script of the interviews exemplifies the extracted themes:

I do not know about all statistical procedures for estimating the reliability and validity of language tests, I guess my colleagues and I need to attend workshops on test psychometrics

G. Curriculum development

Another major need of EFL teachers is related to teachers' knowledge of curriculum development. This category consists of four sub-categories, which are presented in Table 8.

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Table 8

Subcategories of Curriculum Development

| | |
|--|----------|
| Material development/adaptation/adoption | 16/53.3% |
| Lesson plan | 15/50% |
| Book evaluation | 15/50% |
| Hidden curriculum | 14/46.6% |

It is seen that EFL teachers need to receive professional development training on four areas of curriculum development. About 53.3% of the participants stated they need to learn more about material development, adapting materials from the other sources, and adopting materials for teaching EFL to learners of English language. About 50% of the participants of the study stated that are not good at preparing lesson plans: daily less plans and yearly lesson plans. As an example one of the teachers stated:

The same percent of the participants (50%) believed that they need to know how to evaluate textbooks. They believed that there are a lots of educational textbooks developed for teaching English to non-native speakers of English, however, they do not which book series are the best to select among. Results also show that they heard of hidden curriculum and consequences of hidden curriculum, however, they do not know how a particular curriculum might affect learners' attitudes, perceptions, and goals. Also, 46.7% of the participants also stated that it is necessary for them to learn how avoid the negative consequences which an ELT curriculum might cause. For instance,

H. Educational technology

Learning about educational technology is another professional development need of EFL teachers. Participants of the study argued that they need to learn about four areas related to educational technology. The sub-areas of educational technology are presented in Table 9.

Table 9

Education technology needs of EFL teachers

| | |
|----------------------------|-----------|
| CALL | 17/ 56.6% |
| Social networks/multimedia | 15/50% |

| | |
|---------------------|----------|
| The use of internet | 14/56.6% |
| Educational devices | 13/43.3% |

As it is seen, 56.6% of the participants believe that almost all teachers should know about computer-assisted language learning: uses, advantages, challenges and solutions. Also, it is seen 50% of the participants stated that social networks and multimedia have greatly affected education in general and teaching English as a foreign language; however, they are not well aware of the theories and practices of social networks and multimedia.

Moreover, 46.6% of the participants stated that EFL teachers should know how to use internet in teaching. Teachers believed that they need training on the use of internet and its implications in teaching. The last subarea of educational technology is teachers' ability in using the most recently invented educational devices and soft wares which can be used by teachers of English as a foreign language.

5. Discussion

The results of the content analysis showed that EFL teachers need 8 types of professional development needs: teaching methods and skills, language proficiency, linguistics and metalinguistic, management/Communication skills, educational psychology literacy, assessment, curriculum development, as well as education psychology. The same findings were reported by a number of studies (Alibakhshi & Dehvari, 2015; Timperley, Wilson, Barrar, & Fung, 2007; Richards, 2008; Borg, 2006; Burns, Freeman, & Edwards, 2015; Canagarajah, 2013; Larsen-Freeman & Cameron, 2008).

With regard to the teachers' needs for in-service courses on management/communication skills, educational technology, assessment, and curriculum development, it can, in line with the findings of the other researchers, argued that EFL teachers need to have general pedagogical knowledge to account for knowledge of instructional process (e.g., teaching

methods, classroom management), student learning (e.g., individual dispositions of students and their learning processes), and assessment (e.g., diagnosing principles and evaluation procedures; König, 2013). This finding also supports the findings of previous works Shulman (1987), Grossman (1990), and Schoenfeld (1998). According to her framework, PCK comprises teacher knowledge of curriculum, knowledge of learners, and the knowledge of teaching strategies and multiple representations.

With regard to teachers' need for language skills, as Borg (2006) believes, it is argued language teaching is determined by a curriculum which takes into account both oral and written competencies and heavily relies on specific teaching methods and strategies that support oral communication (communicative language teaching (Spada, 2007; Watzke, 2007). An EFL teacher's knowledge base is limited when he or she lacks appropriate communication skills, but at the same time, the sole command of the target language will not suffice to provide high quality learning opportunities to students.

The findings are also echoing of several related studies (e.g., Akbari & Tajik, 2009; Gatbonton, 1999; Karimi, 2011). It can be therefore argued that EFL teachers still need to develop their general pedagogical knowledge. Among the general pedagogical knowledge categories, curriculum development was rated as the least important while teaching skills/methods was rated as the most important. Therefore, it can be argued that as EFL teachers always use the textbooks which language institutes either develop or adapt, they do not find it urgent to take courses on curriculum development.

Knowledge of communication/ and manage skills was also reported to be significant because as Bukova-Güzel (2010) believes we expect EFL teachers training to know language learning concepts and approaches and be able to apply instructional strategies to present content, as well as to use appropriate

activities in instruction. In line with the similar findings of the other studies (e.g., Yazdanmehr & Akbari, 2015; Langland, Lewis-Palmer & Sugai, 1998), it can be postulated that EFL teachers need to improve their knowledge of classroom management so that they know how to transfer their knowledge to the students with different ages, attitudes, motivations, and language proficiencies.

Another finding of the study is that EFL teachers need to learn about educational technology, most particularly computer assessment language learning. This finding is also consistent with a few studies (Rogers, 1995; Watson, 1998; Woodrow, 1992), which found that ICT should be integrated in education, and some other scholars who argued that that EFL teachers should be educated regarding how to make use of technology in their courses (Jones, 2001; Kessler & Plakans, 2008).

Regarding, the importance of assessment to EFL teachers' it can be argued that language teachers need to have knowledge in assessment related process (Lam, 2015; Plake, 1993; Peobham, 2009; Stiggins, 2010; Tao, 2014). This finding is also supported by Xu and Brown (2017, p. 134) who stated that "assessment literacy should start with the investigation of its knowledge base; thus, the assessment knowledge lies at the heart of assessment literacy".

6. Conclusions

Based on the results reported in the previous section several conclusions can be made. First, it can be concluded pedagogical knowledge is more important to EFL learners than the knowledge about language. Moreover, it can be concluded that EFL teachers need to develop competencies in the use of educational technology, EFL curriculum, and language assessment. Furthermore, it can be concluded EFL teachers need be experts in language teaching methodology and learning, management and communication strategies, and develop competency in how to motivate EFL learners and

increase their own teaching motivation. As EFL teachers are teaching the most recently published textbooks by native speakers, they need to be well aware of the teaching methods and learning theories underlying the recently textbooks. The findings can also be used by language institutes and teacher training centers to provide EFL teachers' with the required professional development courses based on the teachers' preferences and priorities. As each of the extracted needs might affect EFL teachers teaching effectiveness and EFL learners' uptakes, the other researchers are suggested to investigate the impact of professional development activities on EFL teachers' related variables such as pedagogical beliefs and practices, assessment practices, and uses of technology.

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