Iranian EFL Teachers' Experiences with Online Professional Development: Perceptions and Preferences

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A B S T R A C T

Professional development (PD) has received a growing attention in teacher education research since it has the potential to affect teacher learning. More recently and in particular as an aftermath of COVID-19 pandemic, online PD modes have overtaken more traditional face to face approaches. Despite this, studies on language teachers' preferences for online PD approaches have been limited. To bridge this gap, this study investigated Iranian English as Foreign Language (EFL) teachers' perceptions of online PD. Participants included 105 male and female EFL instructors teaching at private institutes, universities, and public schools. An online questionnaire consisting of closed- and open-ended items was employed to discover teachers' perspectives on PD. The findings indicated that despite having little or no online PD experiences, most teachers had a positive perception towards an electronic mode of professional learning and rated expert teacher applications, online video lesson study, and video library as their favourite online resources. The study recommends taking advantage of various online PD formats in teacher education programs, esp. at a time when most teaching and learning continues to be online worldwide.

Keywords: COVID-19; online professional development; teacher education; teacher perceptions; teacher preferences

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Introduction

Teaching is a multi-faceted process and lends itself easily to changes and improvements in the surrounding fields. As a key dimension of this dynamic area, teachers need to tailor themselves professionally to novelties around them. Professional development (PD) programs offer teachers the opportunity to receive the latest modifications in the teaching practice (Çimer et al., 2010). In simpler terms, by engaging in efficient PD programs, teachers may notice shifts and demands in learning and acquire a new ideology and method (Çimer et al., 2010; Shahin & Yildrim, 2016; Sokel, 2019). As the most probable consequence of PD courses, teacher learning is a change in teachers' proficiency, perception, and beliefs, and this innovation may result in considerable modifications in their classroom practices (Desimone, 2009; Sokel, 2019).

As the literature documents, teachers who participate in efficient PD programs probably change (Sokel, 2019) and then adopt appropriate techniques to further the teaching cycle and help students progress in learning (Desimone, 2009; Çimer et al., 2010). Thanks to technological advances in educational research, novel PD frameworks and methods have been introduced (Bates et al., 2016; Fishman et al., 2013) like the use of social media in training teachers (Liljekvist et al., 2017). The insurmountable capacity of online PD has made it internationally available to all teachers (Dede et al., 2009; Robinson, 2008), and therefore new PD applications for teachers' ongoing professional learning tend to be a worldwide policy (Jensen et al., 2016).

Indeed, there are a sizeable number of studies on traditional uses of PD in teacher education research. For example, a line of literature has focused on teachers' professional learning (Tavakoli, 2020) and the effectiveness of PD programs (Gao et al., 2021; Guskey, 2000; Postholm, 2012). Another body of research on teachers' professional education has revealed PD efficiency could be related to certain contents, consistency in the long run, and dynamic instructiveness (Amendum & Fitzgerald, 2013; Borko, 2004; Desimone & Stuckey, 2014; Lindvall, Helenius, & Wiberg, 2018; Penuel, Gallagher, & Moorthy, 2011; Yoon, Liu, & Goh, 2010). Previous research has fully examined teachers' perspectives on traditional PD and its applications (Alzahrani & Althaqafi, 2020; Bean & Morewood, 2011; Desimon, 2009; Farrell, 2001; Ingvarson et al., 2005; Neuman & Cunningham, 2009; Schlager et al., 2009). Investigating teachers' experiences of professional development is crucial in exploring the practicality and fruitfulness of PD (Freeman, et al., 2016). However, there has been inadequate attention to teachers' perceptions of online formats of PD. One major study in this respect is Parsons et al. (2019), who explored teachers' perceptions of online PD in America. A total of 380 randomly selected elementary, middle and high school teachers across different majors participated in the study. The survey revealed the accessibility of online PD at any time as the most favorable outcome of teachers' participation. The research also estimated teachers' engagement in different approaches to online PD and rated their involvement in formal and informal modes. In addition, it revealed the extent to which American teachers evaluated the importance of online PD benefits.

Despite a good number of studies on traditional PD, the position of online PD is not well documented in the literature. Moreover, only a few researchers have investigated teachers' previous experiences with online PD, and the type of online professional training. More importantly, previous research has not tackled the extent to which teachers apply what they learn in PD programs in their real practices (Parsons et al., 2019). Motivated by the scarcity of research in this area, this study was planned to discover Iranian EFL teachers' experiences and views about PD programs and their consequences for real practices.

Different types of online PD have received attention in the literature. For instance, mobile learning is a novel model to gain knowledge through wireless mobile connection network technology and devices like laptops, tablets, and smartphones. Gao et al. (2021) note that this type of learning has the advantage of accessibility, self-training, and intense connection. Similarly, social media has been recognised as one informal way to accumulate knowledge and as a means to PD.

Online PD is believed to be advantageous in many aspects. Running PD courses in an online format solves problems of managing high-quality programs (Reeves & Pedulla, 2011) and alleviates the challenges of traditional face-to-face PD courses (Magidin de Kramer et al., 2012). Some problems associated with traditional forms include unreasonable costs, teachers' hectic plans, and a lack of expert teacher trainers (Alzahrani & Althaqafi, 2020). Thus, designing and arranging PD in an online form is noticeably worthwhile. More importantly, the easy access to online PD has made it globally available for teachers across contexts (Robinson, 2008) and understandably online PD has been on the rise due to the current COVIDE 19 outbreak, although some researchers reported that one day running workshops may have no effects on creating changes in teachers' work habits (Kragler, et al., 2014; Desimone, 2009).

Empirical studies on online PD programs

Several empirical studies have been conducted on teachers' professional learning. For instance, Alibakhshi and Dehvari (2015) interviewed 20 Iranian EFL teachers working at high school. They explored their perceptions of CPD (continuous professional development) and the types of activities they engaged in while teaching; they found CPD helped teachers develop their skills and acquire knowledge and motivated them to further participate in CPD constantly. However, the researchers studied traditional PD, not online one. In the context of Turkey, Yumru (2015) investigated EFL teachers' perceptions of the most influential teacher learning activities and explored teachers' suggestions for improving a new program called INSETT (in-service teacher-training) in a secondary state school. The findings demonstrated teachers appreciate practical and experiential activities that contribute to observing and evaluating their teaching practices and themselves as teachers. The researcher also discovered teachers' preferences as identifying teacher needs, matching the content of PD courses to the strategies used by trainers, establishing empowerment at schools, and building local teacher networks. Whereas enlightening results were declared, this study also focused on traditional PD. In addition, it was limited to teachers' perceptions toward one PD program, so it failed to be generalized to teachers' entire experiences with PD.

The literature also includes studies about teachers' needs and preferences for professional development. One critical empirical report is the study conducted by Liao et al. (2017). They asked K12 school teachers for their ideal technology, PD content and format, in three PD models: face-to-face, online and blended PD. In addition, they asked the participants what PD experiences were most valuable and essential for them as professionals. There was a significant preference for online PD formats due to its accessibility, variability, and interactivity.

In an investigation in America, An (2018) examined the effect of online PD courses on K12 teachers' perceptions and behavioral intentions regarding the use of digital games in the classrooms. The results demonstrated positive changes in American teachers' perceptions, self-efficacy, and intentions; but nothing was explored about teachers' future desires to approaches to online PD. In another experimental study in America, Healy et al. (2020). examined the effect of

an online PD course on physical educators and found it to be effective in improving teachers' skills and knowledge

More recently, Alzahrani and Althaqafi (2020), in a longitudinal study, examined teachers' perceptions of the efficiency of online professional teacher programs in a Saudi University. They explored teachers' perceptions through a survey and found some reservations in teachers' positive perspectives to online PD. They believe that teachers' needs and priorities as well as the barriers they encounter should be considered in OPT (online professional teachers) programs.

An increasing number of studies on online PD are being done globally (e.g., Alimirzaee & Ashraf, 2016; Alzahrani & Althaqafi, 2020; Parsons et al., 2019), but this line of research is not very rich in the Iranian context. Many researchers, however, have highlighted the importance of online PD in educational settings. For example, Alimirzaee and Ashraf (2016) examined the effect of online peer knowledge sharing on Iranian EFL teachers' PD. The researchers found that the experimental group developed significantly after the treatment. However, there has been scant attention to teachers' attitudes toward their past experiences on online PD. Therefore, the present study addressed this gap by probing into EFL teachers' perceptions of the effectiveness of online PD. Our further motivation was to discover the differences between the teachers holding positive and negative perceptions of online PD regarding their preferences for diverse PD approaches. The following research questions were addressed in this study:

1. What are the attitudes of Iranian EFL teachers toward the effectiveness of online PD programs?

2. What are the attitudes of Iranian EFL teachers toward different approaches to online PD?

3. What are the differences between teachers with positive and negative attitudes to online PD in terms of their preferences for PD approaches?

Method

Participants

A pool of male and female EFL teachers working at private language institutes, public schools, or universities in Iran participated in the study. A convenience sampling process was used based on teachers' availability and willingness to participate (Dörnyei, 2007). All participating teachers gave their informed consent to be a part of our study. The questionnaire was sent to 112 English language teachers who initially agreed to participate in the survey (private institute teachers = 53.3%, university or college instructors = 22.9%, public school teachers = 16.2%, and others who did not indicate their working place = 7.6%).

A sum of 112 individuals completed and returned the questionnaire. Only 105 questionnaires were included in the final analysis, and the rest were excluded due to incomplete responses. From 105 respondents, 56.6% (n = 59) were female, and 43.4% (n = 46) were male. Their teaching experience ranged from 1 to 25 years and they held bachelor, masters or doctorate degrees.

Instruments

An adopted survey was used to investigate teachers' perception of online PD and to record their understanding of PD effectiveness in an online format. Parsons et al. (2019) included four

primary constructs in the questionnaire, including teachers' former experiences in online PD programs, attitudes towards efficient online PD, motivation for engaging in online PD, and the probability of participation in future online PD. Each construct included formal and informal online PD items. The final version of the questionnaire includes 45 items in 5 sections with different formats (3 open-ended questions, 23 Likert scale questions, two dichotomous-response questions, 12 multiple choice questions, and 5 demographic questions). Table 1 demonstrates the distribution of each construct among items of the questionnaire.

Table 1
Items Associated with Each Construct in the Questionnaire

Survey construct	number of the items	Sample item
Prior experiences with online PD	4	Have you ever participated in any online PD?
Motivation for participating in online PD	8	What is the primary reason you participated in online PD?
The usefulness of online PD	14	If online PD in which you participated provided the following benefits?
Likelihood of participating in various forms of online PD	13	How likely would you be to engage in the following form of PD?

To ensure the suitability of the instrument for our context, we piloted the questionnaire with a small sample consisting of 20 EFL teachers. Furthermore, we conducted cognitive interviews with five available scholars and teacher educators to evaluate the content appropriacy of the items. In accordance with the feedback from the pilot stage, we slightly refined the items to account for the contextual features of our study. For example, the items were specifically prepared for EFL teachers, contrary to the original questionnaire designed for teachers across majors. The Cronbach's alpha reliability of the questionnaire was estimated to be r = .85, which is believed to be a good reliability indicator. After finalizing the questionnaire, we prepared the survey in a digital format using *google.doc* software.

Procedure and Data analysis

At the first stage, EFL teachers were identified in large professional groups such as TEFL on social media or through our professional networks. After receiving their informed agreement, we sent them the questionnaire link through social media applications, such as WhatsApp, Telegram, Instagram, and LinkedIn.

The questionnaire items were related to their experiences with online PD (research question 1) and online PD models for the future (research question 2). In question 1, the participants were asked about their previous online PD experiences (entirely online, hybrid, etc.). If the response was positive, they were directed to keep answering. In the case of negative response for question 1, the participants were required to move on to question 11.

In data analysis, first, the open-ended responses were analyzed through content analysis, and the emerging categories were labeled and grouped, with details added on frequencies where relevant. Next, we further ran 13 independent samples *t-test* to examine the differences among teachers holding positive and those with negative attitudes toward online PD concerning their preferences of online PD formats. To do this, we placed those teachers who had largely, extremely, or moderately beneficial experience in one group (positive group) and those who had slightly or not beneficial experience in another group (negative group).

Results

This study examined participants' perceptions of their previous experiences with online PD and their attitudes toward various PD approaches. We also investigated the differences between teachers holding positive and negative attitudes in terms of their preferences for multiple approaches to online PD. Below, the results are presented separately for each research question.

With regard to the first research question, the results are presented in terms of three main categories in the questionnaire: teachers' previous experiences with online PD, their motives for participating in online PD, and the effectiveness of the online PD program.

Teachers' previous experiences with online PD

Out of 105 respondents, 28.8% reported that they had participated in formal online PD. It shows that the majority of the participants (70.2%) had not previously taken part in any type of formal online PD. In an open-ended question, teachers with online PD experience were also asked to present the PD topic covered in their programs. The topics are listed in Table 2. The most common issues were teacher training, assessment, education, IELTS teaching, and different approaches to teaching language skills. In this part of the questionnaire, teachers were also asked about the medium of online PD courses. We found that most online PD courses were run through video conferencing or other online platforms like Adobe Connect and Zoom.

Table 2
The Topics of Online PD Courses based on Participants' Reports

Code
Different approaches to teaching English
Different approaches to teaching English to learners at different proficiency levels
Different approaches to teaching English to learners at different age groups
Teaching different English Language skills
Syllabus design & material development
Teacher training
Leadership courses
Instruction of other topics related to learners' issues (corrective feedback, homework, …)
Teaching IELTS
Using multimedia
Education (hybrid education)
Teachers' motivation
Learners' motivation
Online English courses
Well-being (happiness, resolution, time management)

Respondents also reported on their previous experiences with informal online PD like Twitter, Meetup, Facebook groups, or other online formats that are not a part of a formal PD program. Most teachers (55.9%) reported that they participated in an informal online PD.

Teachers' motivations for participating in online PD

In the first part of the questionnaire, the participants were also invited to provide their reasons for participating or not participating in online PD. A good number of teachers (41.2%) responded that it was more convenient to participate in online PD. Moreover, about a third (29.4%) chose to participate in online PD due to the lack of traditional formats. With regard to the reasons for not participating in online PD programs, 36.7% represented their inclination for traditional face-to-face PDs. The second commonly reported reason was their concerns about not receiving any

credits from their schools (23.3%) for participating in such online training programs. Another interesting reason involved the participants' lack of awareness of online PD formats. In this regard, only 6.7% thought that online PD would not be helpful. A list of responses to this part of the questionnaire is provided in Table 3.

The effectiveness of online PD

In terms of PD effectiveness, 55.9% of respondents rated online PD as extremely beneficial, 32.4% as moderately helpful, and 11.8% as slightly effective. Almost no participant found the online PD to be ineffective (Table 3).

Table 3
Teachers' attitudes toward the effectiveness of online PD programs related to three categories of research question 1

Teachers' reasons for participating in online professional development rather than a face-to-face format	Teachers' reasons for not participating in online professional development	To what extent was formal online PD beneficial	To what extent were you able to apply what you learned from your most recent formal online PD to your teaching?	What, if anything, primarily prevented you from applying what you learned from the formal online PD to your classroom instruction?	To what extent was informal online PD beneficial?	To what extent were you able to apply what you learned from informal online PD to your teaching?	What, if anything, primarily prevented you from applying what you learned from the online PD to your classroom instruction?
It was more convenient to participate online 41.2%	I prefer to participate in face-to-face professional development 36.7%	Largely beneficial 35.3%	Moderately extent 51.4%	Nothing. I was able to apply what I learned. 47.1%	Moderately beneficial 43.3%	Moderately extent 54.8%	Nothing. I was able to apply what I learned. 25.8%
There was no option to participate in face-to-face 29.4%	I do not receive credit from my school or district for online professional development 23.3%	Moderately beneficial 32.4%	Large extent 34.3%	It was not allowed by my school's policies /curriculum 14.7	Slightly beneficial 30%	Large extent 22.6%	It was not relevant to my teaching 22.6%
It was mandatory that I participated online 23.5%	I am not aware of any online professional development offerings 16.7%	Extremely beneficial 20.6%	Small extent 8.6%	I did not have time to plan instruction based on what I learned 11.8	Largely beneficial 20%	Small extent 19.4%	It was not allowed by my school's policies /curriculum 16.1%
It was less expensive to participate online 5.9%	It is too expensive 13.3%	Slightly beneficial 11.8%	Not sure/not applicable 5.7%	I did not have the tools materials I needed 11.8	Extremely beneficial 6.7%	Not sure/not applicable 3.2%	I did not have time to plan instruction based on what I learned 12.9%
Other 0%	I do not think it would be useful 6.7%	Not at all beneficial 0%	Not at all 0%	I meant to implement what I learned but never got around to it 8.8	Not at all beneficial 0%	Not at all 0%	I did not have the tools materials I needed 12.9%
	I do not have the equipment I need to participate online 3.3%			Other 5.9			Other 6.5%
	I don't think I have the technical skills needed to participate in online professional development 0%						I meant to implement what I learned, but never got around to it 3.2%

Besides, more than half of the teachers (51.4%) stated that they could apply what they learned from the most recent online PD to their real practices to a moderate extent. Almost one-third of the teachers (34.3%) reported that they could extend their learning to real teaching situations to a large extent. Finally, 8.6% reported on their rare application of PD in real classes, and only 5.7% were not sure about the applicability of PD lessons (see Table 3).

Respondents listed the obstacles to the use of online PD outcomes in their classes. Almost half the teachers (47.1%) asserted that there were no particular barriers in extending PD results to their real practices. However, 14.7% reported school policies or curriculum restrictions as the main hindrance. The next obstacle was the lack of time to devise instructional practices based on what they learned (11.8%) due to the inaccessibility of suitable materials. Finally, only a small percentage (5.9%) found PD as impertinent to their career. Table 3 also demonstrates the main obstacles.

In terms of their perceptions of previous online PD programs, a high percentage of teachers claimed that they had experienced most of the listed benefits in their online PD (Figure 1). The most commonly reported benefit was their potential to connect with people outside their immediate geographic area (78.4%), followed by access to the resources unavailable in their local areas (72.2%).
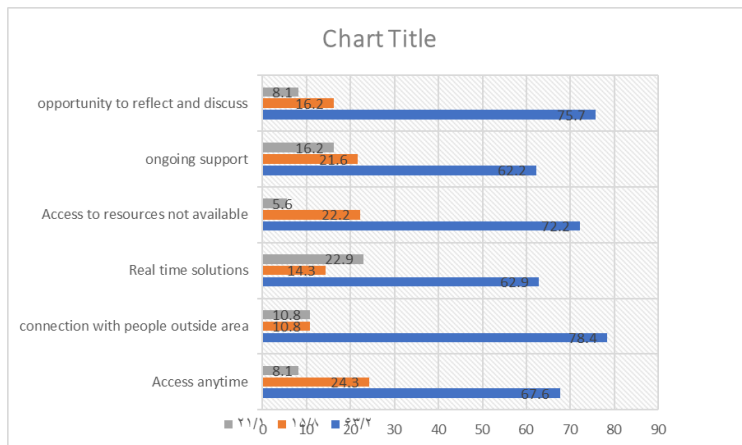

Figure 1. Teachers' Perceptions of Online PD Benefits   **Yes**   **No**   I don't know

With regard to informal online PD programs, almost half of the teachers (44.1%) reported that they participated in such programmes. Furthermore, 26.7% thought informal online PD was extremely beneficial (Table 3). The respondents were also asked about the extent to which they were able to apply what they learned from informal online PD to their teaching. Based on the results, 54.8% moderately extended informal PD outcomes to teaching situations, 22.6% largely applied the lessons, 19.4% employed a small scale of the lessons, and nobody reported 'not at all'. The last item about informal online PD was associated with the obstacles to applying what they learned to their classroom instruction. A quarter of the teachers, 25.8%, confirmed that there were no barriers, 22.6% found informal online PD to be totally irrelevant, and 12.9% indicated time and material shortage as the main obstacles to PD applicability (see Table 3 for more details).

The second research question addressed teachers' attitudes toward different approaches to online PD, and the researchers asked them to rate the likelihood of their participation in various online PD activities (Table 4). The most common activity reported by teachers was expert teacher application (47.2%). Online video lesson study was the next popular activity among teachers (46.2%). In terms of video library activities, 38.7% of the teachers rated it very likely, and 30.2% opted for likely choices, while 31.1% were unlikely or very unlikely to participate in real-time instruction feedback, which was the most improbable activity among the participants.

Table 4
Teachers' Ratings of likelihood They Would Participate in Different Online PD Activities

Activity	M	SD
Online video lesson study	4.16	.13
Expert teacher application	4.2	.90
Student profiles	4.02	.13
video library	3.97	.14
Student perspectives	3.85	.15
Virtual reality	3.83	.15
Online community of practice	3.82	.15
Budgets for participation teaching challenges	3.74	.14
Scavenger Hunt	3.66	.13
Online young adult literature /children	3.63	.16
Gamified PD	3.59	.16
real-time instruction feedback	3.18	.18

Note: 1 (unlikely) _ 5 (very likely)

The last research question was related to the differences between the teachers with positive and negative perspectives in terms of their preferences of online PD versions. The *t*-tests indicated significant group differences for one type of online PD format (sig =. 04, t = 2.02). The teachers who had positive perceptions of their previous experiences were more willing (M = 3.9, SD =. 84) to participate in Teaching Challenges than those who perceived online PD slightly or not beneficial (M = 3.5, SD = 1.12), with an effect size of d = 0.46.

Table 5
Results of t-test for Finding Group Differences between Teachers' Perceptions and Teaching Challenges Activity

	Group statistics					
	Teachers' perception	N	Mean	Sig.	F	t
Teaching Challenges	positive	78	3.9359	.045	4.110	2.029
	negative	27	3.5185			

Discussion

This study explored Iranian EFL teachers' perceptions of former experiences with online PD programs, their attitudes towards efficient online PD, their motivation for engaging in online PD, and the probability of their participation in future online PD programs. The findings showed that a majority of teachers (70.2%) did not take part in formal online PD and only 55.9% participated in informal online PD formats such as Twitter, Meetup, and Facebook groups. This finding disagrees with Parsons et al.'s (2019) reports about American teachers' participation in formal online PD (77%). However, generally, in both studies, a majority of teachers participated in both formal and informal online PD. Furthermore, to a large extent (88.3%), the teachers perceived that formal online PD was extremely, largely, or moderately beneficial, and only a few (11.8%) considered this type of PD slightly beneficial. On the other hand, 70% of teachers also perceived that informal online PD was extremely, largely, or moderately beneficial, but less than a third (30%) considered it slightly beneficial. Despite the outnumbered participation of teachers in informal online PD compared to the formal one, the extent of contentment with formal online experiences was higher. But, this level of satisfaction is hardly comparable with informal online PD since only 28.8% of teachers experienced formal professional development.

In this study, we found that most teachers regarded online PD as a beneficial format to address their career requirements, and a small percentage of participants considered the online version ineffective. Similar to our findings, Parsons et al. (2019) observed that only a small number of teachers found online PD to be unhelpful. Moreover, a considerable number of the teachers (51.4%) expressed that they could apply what they learned from the most recent online PD in classroom practices to a moderate extent. While 34.3% stated that they could expand their learning to pedagogical contexts to a large extent, only 5.7% were doubtful about the applicability of PD lessons; this finding is in compliance with Hearly et al. (2020) since 70% of teachers in their study could apply lessons learned from PD course to their class.

In their self-report, teachers expressed the need for more practical PD courses, mainly formal PD programs held by the Ministry of Education and well-known teacher trainers. Thus, teachers' use of informal PD platforms could be due to the lack of well-designed official PD programs. Even those few mandatory PD programs in which they participated (16.2%) lack efficient or motivational quality to encourage further improvements. Therefore, the discrepancy between our findings and those of Parsons et al. (2019) may be due to differences in contextual factors and availability of facilities for designing and running online PD courses.

Additionally, most teachers referred to the convenience of online formats as the primary motive for their participation. A small number of the participants found the online PD format as the only option at that time. This finding represents that teachers prefer to participate in face-to-face traditional PD courses, which aligns with Parsons et al.'s (2019) study who found the same reasons for teachers' participation in online PD and contradicts Liao et al's (2017) investigation in which teachers preferred online PD to other formats, i.e. face-to-face and blended PD.

Interestingly, this study showed a high percentage (55.9%) of teachers' participation in informal online PD, as reported by Sadeghi and Richards (2021). In addition, most teachers reported no obstacles to integrating online PD outcomes into real practices. However, a notable finding was related to the restrictions of schools or curriculums with regard to teachers' use of different methods that are not in line with institutionalized regulations. This is attributable to teachers' lack of teaching independence in their professional contexts, which was also evident in the self-report. The teachers, particularly public school and institute teachers, stated that they did not have adequate freedom to choose instructional materials and practices independently.

In terms of the online PD activities favored by teachers, we found that the likelihood of their participation in future online PD activities was high. The most commonly reported activity included an expert teacher application on a smart device, which would allow them to cooperate with educational experts and benefit from their advice. We relate this finding to Vygotsky's (1987) Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) theory, which highlights the importance of scaffolding by an expert or a more proficient peer in boosting the learning process. Confirming this, Warford (2011) views ZPD development as a procedure to scaffold teachers when they have the opportunity to ponder over their experiences in educational contexts. The same is true for online video lesson study as the other commonly favored activity, through which teachers share videos within a community. Indeed, Vygotsky's (1978) social learning theory regards learning as a social and cultural process. Thus, there is a reciprocal interaction in an online PD mode among colleagues and experts, which results in teacher learning.

The video library was the third preferred activity among teachers, allowing online discussions with other educators and scheduled chats about educational issues. This finding implies that teachers prefer collaboration and active expert exchange of information with each other. Furthermore, it is supported by Bandura's social learning (1989) process that is possible in a partnership with peers as efficient samples. Moreover, according to Parsons et al. (2019), online PD programs can

improve and reinforce teachers' academic proficiency if they involve collaborative pedagogic interactions among participants and are flexible. The least favored activity was real-time instruction feedback, which offers immediate feedback from an outside expert while teaching. Based on the open-ended responses, teachers found this situation to be too disrupting. We believe that this activity may hinder the flow of education through offering immediate intervention (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). After this activity, gamified PD was the less favored one which is very close to the result reported by It demonstrates that teachers were not willing to take part in a fun activity but the truth is that gamified PD is not a fun online PD; on the contrary, it is a serious form of PD. We concur with Parsons et al. that the apparent misleading outlook of gamified PD affected the teachers negatively and made them fail to understand it properly. We also found that teachers with positive perceptions of their previous online PD experiences appreciated teaching challenges. We can interpret that teachers with positive perceptions may prefer to tackle serious issues and unexpected class problems.

Conclusion

This study explored Iranian English teachers' perceptions of online PD programs. We found that EFL teachers would welcome different approaches to online PD implementations and prefer well-designed and structured PD courses in their professional contexts. Our findings can act as a framework for efficient and fruitful online PD course design in Iran and beyond. Besides, the findings can enlighten teacher trainers' views about teachers' demands, desires, attitudes, and preferences for an online model of PD program and help them design more suitable and needs-based courses.

The present study had two main limitations. First, only a small sample of teachers participated in the study due to the COVID-19 pandemic, and this may question the generalizability of our findings. Secondly, the questionnaire was distributed among voluntary teachers with high motivation, and there may be a bias against less motivated teachers. Given these limitations, there are a good number of avenues for further research in the online PD domain. For example, future researchers can target a larger number of teachers with different levels of motivation. In addition, researchers can analyze the differences between formal and informal online PD formats and their influence on teachers' perceptions of PD efficiency. Indeed, future research can offer solutions for the obstacles teachers encounter in participating in online PD courses. Finally, using our findings as a baseline, future researchers can offer more practical and proportionate activities for application in teaching contexts.

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