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Conceptualization of Iranian EFL Teachers' Perceptions of Their Professional Learning Practices: Implications for Teacher Development

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Teachers' professional learning plays an important role in their attempt to change their teaching practices; however, few studies have been conducted on how teachers prepare themselves for the vast initiatives in ameliorating students' outcomes. This study aimed to explore EFL teachers' perceptions toward their professional learning practices and their professional developmental orientations that contribute to the process of their professional learning. To this end, 30 Iranian EFL teachers selected through purposive sampling participated in this qualitative phenomenological study. The data was collected through focus-group interviews, semi-structured interviews, and narrative inquiries to ensure the trustworthiness criteria of the data. The thematic analysis of the data revealed three themes of professional development programs, collaborative learning and experience-based learning. The results showed that only a few teachers were satisfied with the school-based professional learning programs, indicating that revision in the educational system was required to develop teachers' professional learning. Meanwhile, effective learning occurred through collaboration among the teachers and the mutual learning between teachers and students, hence, leading to participative decision-making and teachers' reflective practice. Overall, participants mentioned students' outcomes as a key level of teachers' professional learning. This study has important implications for policymakers, school administrators, and teacher educators.

Keywords: *collaboration, mutual learning, quality teaching, professional learning, professional development*

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1. Introduction

There are demands for teachers' active roles in education, so this causes them to be lifelong learners. They ought to frequently learn and adapt themselves to the new world changes and to be in harmony with educational challenges (Knight, 2002; Mohammadi et al., 2020; Ranjbar Mohammadi et al., 2022; Mohammadi et al., 2023). Hence, teachers are asked to regularly change their teaching practice and engage in professional learning (PL) activities to develop their knowledge and maintain their work engagement and motivation (Brouhier et al., 2023). PL prepares planned experiences and opportunities in identified areas to enhance continual professional growth for all of those who sustain students' learning outcomes (Wells, 2014). Thus, developing PL programs is important in ensuring that teachers can learn and apply the practices and pedagogies required to address students' social and academic needs (Prenger et al., 2017).

Teachers' PL has been probed in a variety of views such as enhancing teaching quality and promoting learners' input (Yuan & Powell, 2013). However, the importance of ongoing educational research trying to find out teachers' PL practices in quality teaching is an untapped and relatively new area of research. Recently, educational policy in the world has increasingly emphasized the significance of teachers' PL as a primary factor in student achievement and school improvement (McElearney et al., 2019). Accordingly, teacher education program providers are responsible for preparing high-quality teachers to meet the demands of a dynamic and evolving society (Tang et al., 2020). To enhance teaching quality and to effectively address teachers' needs, PL activities should be included in teaching and focus on students' learning and thinking (Whitcomb et al., 2009). Hence, considering schools as learning communities and teachers as learners is regarded as fundamental for PL (Geijsel et al., 2009). But in reality, many teachers are left to learn by themselves, ironically, similar to the teachers' learning model of 'swim or sink' in which many PL programs for teachers have been abandoned (Wang et al., 2024).

Unfortunately, there is a misconception regarding the factors that contribute to teachers' professional knowledge. Hence, teaching is misrepresented as the mere transfer of information. Nevertheless, teaching is a complex process that relies on the interplay between individual and social processes, where pedagogy is skillfully communicated through intelligent decision-making by the teacher (Smith, 2017). In the recent studies on teachers' PL, some problems of teacher education have been raised. These problems arise when teachers are prepared to deliver a pre-established curriculum instead of supporting their critical thinking skills (Kostiainen et al., 2018). Teachers are often regarded as passive recipients of professional development (PD) rather than active participants who can set their learning

goals and design their own PL (Louws et al., 2017). Until now, few studies have been conducted on how new approaches such as PL are working as part of teacher education. Therefore, providing meaningful learning experiences is essential to ensure teachers' comprehension of the intended learning, especially within teacher education programs (Daves & Roberts, 2010). Thus, this study aimed to explore Iranian EFL teachers' perceptions and experiences of their PL practices, their goals of learning, and the professional developmental orientations contributing to the process of their PL and quality teaching. It provides valuable insights for teacher education program providers into addressing teachers' needs in future education.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Teachers' PD

Teachers' PD (TPD) is regarded as a structured and facilitated activity for teachers intended to enhance their teaching skills (Sims & Fletcher-Wood, 2021). In studies on TPD, several factors have been found to be related to its effectiveness in improving teachers' teaching ability (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017). Some of these important factors include teachers' collaborative participation in subject-specific PD, teachers' active role in improving their teaching practice, and teachers' PL occurring over a long time (Desimone, 2009). Hence, TPD is necessary to improve schools, change classroom practices, and enhance students' learning outcomes (Borko, 2004).

PD that causes positive changes in teacher practice is an integral part of educational improvement (Guskey, 2002; Jalilzadeh et al., in press; Molle, 2021). Hence, exploring what facilitates this change of practice has special importance (Romijn et al., 2021). Since teachers play an important role in policy implementation, they require enhanced instructional practice through PD (Germuth, 2018). Effective PD changes teachers' professional knowledge, practices, and beliefs, hence, leading to improvement in students' learning (Taddese & Rao, 2022). Meanwhile, it causes teachers to use active teaching methods in the classroom and to practice new teaching strategies (Buczynski & Hansen, 2010). Thus, in order to acquire innovative practices and to grow professionally, teachers need to enhance their professional knowledge through PD opportunities (Negi, 2016).

Effective PD programs create chances for coaching, collaboration, reflective practice, and constructive feedback (Opfer & Pedder, 2011). Hence, teachers participating in a PD program actively seek opportunities

for peer partnerships, both within their professional roles and beyond the school environment. For facilitating teachers' learning, there is a need for them to be guided by high-quality instructors (Bayer, 2014) who should act as models for teaching, leaders of discussions, producers of feedback, and motivators of peer collaboration (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017). This means that if instructors fail to incorporate opportunities for reflection within the program, teachers may not fully grasp the value and relevance of PD (Richardson & Diaz Maggioni, 2018).

2.2. Teachers' PL

Main changes have occurred with teacher development during the past decades. One of these changes was the movement from PD to PL. This movement needs an emphasis on teachers' responsibility (Webster-Wright, 2009). The other important change in the conceptualization of PL is paying attention to the association between the individual and the goals of the institute which prompts teachers to be concerned about students' outcomes. Hence, the development of both teacher and school is significant and a balance should be established between individual needs and organizational needs (Roesken, 2011).

Teachers' professional learning plays a pivotal role not only in facilitating students' academic growth but also in nurturing the diverse set of skills essential for their success in life (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017). PL enables teachers to enhance their teaching practice within the school environment and foster a culture of high-quality teaching (Yuan & Powell, 2013). A range of theoretical frameworks (e.g., theory of learning, a taxonomy of learning, and adult learning) has been driven to help students engage in deep learning (Loewenberg Ball & Forzani, 2009). One of these models is the Quality Teaching Framework (QTF) (Ladwig & King, 2003). QTF is regarded as an extremely helpful way of guiding and examining teaching by providing very specific recommendations for teachers to enhance student learning (Killen, 2007). QTF provides a theoretical foundation for teachers' PL (Yeigh, 2008), and focuses on the equilibrium among the three elements of quality learning environment, intellectual quality, and significance (Gore, 2007). This framework links student learning with the quality of teaching the teachers bring to the learning/teaching process, emphasizing that the outcomes of students' learning are mainly the product of the instruction they receive (Yeigh, 2008).

Recently, many studies have been conducted on the schools' capacity to promote teachers' PL and on the use of effective measures providing real evidence of changes in the PL of teachers (e.g., Geijsel et al., 2009). In a study,

Prenger et al. (2017) conducted a mixed methods study to determine the factors affecting teachers' PD in 23 networked PL communities (PLC). The results showed that motivation was a main factor in teachers' PD. Meanwhile, teachers' perceived leadership, shared goals, and collective focus on students' achievement were the main factors affecting teachers' PL. In another study, Cooper and his colleagues (2020) explored the teachers' perceptions and expectations about their PL needs. The research was carried out in a private all-boys school in Australia, with nearly 1300 students. The participants of the study were 120 teachers working in the senior schools. The data was gathered via focus group interviews. The findings showed that what teachers received in the PL program was not always what they wanted or valued. Hence, PL programs should be compatible with teachers' needs and expectations. In another qualitative study, Teslo et al. (2023) investigated the perceptions of teachers regarding their PL experiences after participating in continual PD (CPD) programs in physically active learning (PAL). Eleven teachers from Norway who were chosen through a purposeful sampling method participated in the study. The reflexive thematic analysis of the data indicated that the teachers considered their participation in CPD as effective by expanding their teaching practice, encouraging collaborative learning, and reflecting on their PL.

In a mixed methods study, Soodmand Afshar and Ghasemi (2020) examined the impediments to the PD and PL of Iranian EFL teachers. The participants were 200 EFL teachers teaching English at language institutes. Findings from descriptive statistics and semi-structured interviews showed that the PD impediments were attributed to three main categories including the teachers themselves, educational policymakers, and administrators of school institutes. Thus, there was a need to have durable and effective school-based PD activities such as online PD methods and peer observation in order to improve teachers' PL.

All of the above-mentioned studies have proposed that schools can be a suitable environment for teachers' PL. However, these studies did not consider teachers' PL practices but rather focused on the outcomes of their PL. Although teachers' PL plays an important role in facilitating their learning-to-learn habit (Czerniawsk et al., 2018), there are few studies to explore their PL practices in a context like Iran. Teachers' PL in Iran has positioned teachers as consumers, not producers of knowledge. Their needs and concerns are not included in the development of PL programs. Those who are at the center of the teaching and learning process have limited control over building their PL experiences, while the basic challenge is to guarantee that PL helps to improve

teachers' ongoing knowledge and practice (Shirazi et al., 2013). Hence, the aim of this study was to explore Iranian EFL teachers' perceptions of their PL practices and to identify how professional learning contributes to improving the quality of their teaching. Thus, based on the discussed literature, the following research question was formulated:

What are Iranian EFL teachers' perceptions toward their PL practices?

3. Method

3.1. Participants

The participants included 30 EFL teachers from two genders (17 female and 13 male) who were selected through purposive sampling from different public high schools in Miandoab, Iran. The rationale for the use of purposive sampling was driven by the aim to closely align the sample with the objectives and goals of the study, thereby enhancing the trustworthiness of the data and the findings (Campbell et al., 2020). Meanwhile, the goal was to ensure a diverse group of teachers with varied experiences, which would generate rich data. The participants were selected among the teachers who held a BA or MA degree in TEFL, and their age range was between 22 and 50. All the participants were native speakers of Azerbaijani language, their second language was Persian, and they were teaching English as a foreign language. All of them volunteered for this study and were free to decline to participate at any phase of the study they wanted.

3.2. Materials and Instruments

Three kinds of interviews were used in this study as follows:

3.2.1. Semi-structured Interviews

Semi-structured interviews are mostly utilized in qualitative research. This method includes a conversation between the participant and the researchers, directed by a flexible interview guide and followed by additional comments and questions (DeJonckheere & Vaughn, 2019). In the semi-structured interviews in this study, the participants were presented with seven open-ended questions (see Appendix) concerning their PL experiences. The interview questions were followed up by new questions, allowing interviewees to elaborate and include any relevant information they deemed important. Interviews continued until saturation of data had been gained because of attaining validity (Morse, 2015).

3.2.2. Focus-group Interviews

Focus-group interview is a qualitative method that involves conducting planned interviews and discussions with a small group of people, led by a moderator. This group interview uses interaction among the members of a group as a source of data (Rabiee, 2004). The participants in this study were divided into six groups of five members for the focus group interviews. The interviews were held in a friendly and relaxed environment to alleviate the participants' stress while expressing themselves, since, according to Wood and Ross-Kerr (2010), creating a natural atmosphere decreases the Hawthorne effect.

3.2.3. Narrative Inquiry

Narrative inquiry is a qualitative research method that uses stories as raw data (Bleakley, 2005). In this study, participants were asked to tell a story concerning their learning experiences as a teacher.

3.3. Procedure

This study used data source triangulation in which the data was collected through multiple data collection methods such as focus-group interviews, semi-structured interviews, and the participants' narration of their PL experiences. First, semi-structured interviews and narrative inquiries were conducted in one-on-one conditions to explore the whys and hows of various issues (Yin, 2015) related to teachers' PL practices. Then, focus group interviews were conducted with participants being divided into five groups of six members.

All the interviews were recorded digitally, transcribed word by word, and double-checked for accuracy by at least two co-authors. Then, they were sent to interviewees to be checked to increase the validity of the interviews. Field notes were immediately taken after each interview to document the necessary contextual information, and individual case summaries were employed to analyze each participant's PL experiences more easily. The interview guide asked teachers to explain their learning goals, their PL activities in the school, and their methods of changing their teaching practice and improving students' outcomes. Then, the interviewer asked them to speak freely about their perceptions regarding their PL experiences. One of the researchers conducted the interviews and the analysis was carried out parallel to the interviews and from the time of the first interview (Holloway & Galvin, 2016).

3.4. Data Analysis

The data was analyzed through Braun and Clark's (2006) six phases of thematic analysis. The transcripts were studied several times by all the

researchers in order to get a general understanding of the text. Then, the main parts of the text were given a code. There was significant agreement between the different coders regarding the data coding. The classification and the coding of the themes were done by all the researchers and then the codes and themes were compared to each other. Any alterations in the themes were discussed by all the researchers until a consensus was made between them.

3.5. Ethical Consideration

In the present study, several important ethical considerations including confidentiality, anonymity, and informed consent were taken into account (Richards & Schwartz, 2002). The participants voluntarily participated in the study and the consent form was obtained from all of them. The goals of the study were clearly explained to them and they were assured of the confidentiality and anonymity of their personal information and conversations. Meanwhile, the privacy of the interview environment was carefully maintained throughout the interview sessions, data analysis, and the dissemination of the research findings. Then, permission for the audio recording of interviews was taken. Files were secured by passwords, and they were kept in a safe place. Moreover, researchers took advantage of the pseudonyms to protect the participants' confidentiality and anonymity.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1. Results

Three key themes emerged from the analysis of the data relating to the teachers' perceptions of their professional learning practices: PD programs, collaborative learning, and experience-based learning.

Theme 1: PD programs

This theme refers to all the courses, training, and classes adopted by educational organizations and policymakers to help teachers learn new skills and knowledge. Meanwhile, it includes all the initiatives teachers take to develop their PD programs to enhance their skills and knowledge. This theme was supported by two main codes of continuous PD and skills-based learning.

Taleb, 51, responded to our questions in the following way:

There is not any organized plan to engage EFL teachers to participate in online courses or join related groups to improve their speaking skills. I myself use different learning activities like

watching English movies, listening to English news, etc. to improve my language proficiency. Teaching is a lifelong process, so I have tried to be a learner throughout my career. I consider myself an active learner and I feel a strong responsibility for using better strategies to teach effectively. In fact, my aim is to improve students' mastery of the target language at all levels of my PL.

For Taleb, PL involves an active and continuous learning, with teachers taking a primary role in their own learning process. He believes that continuing PD is important in enhancing teachers' lifelong learning; hence, teachers should try hard to improve their PD skills. Meanwhile, he claims that despite the lack of opportunities to develop professional skills in the school, his commitment to students and enhancing their mastery of the target language causes him to try hard to learn new knowledge and improve his communication skills. Thus, he sees student outcomes as the key level and the endpoint of PL programs. Accordingly, Taleb adopts a constructivist approach to PL in which the teacher is considered an active learner who is responsible for his or her learning.

Gandom, 50, answered our questions in the following way:

PL programs for EFL teachers, such as TESOL or TEFL courses, should occur in the schools over a long period. All EFL teachers should be engaged in continuous learning till they can easily use their PD to make better teaching decisions, analyze students' learning problems, and solve them.

Gandom believes that EFL teachers should continuously be engaged in school-based PL all the time. In other words, PL will be successful if it is done during on-job learning where there are enough time and opportunities for teachers to learn. Hence, she considers duration or continuous learning necessary for teachers' PL. The main point stated in her remarks is that PL is associated with decision-making and problem-solving. For him, classroom teaching is a multidimensional task; hence, effective skill-based PL programs such as TEFL or TESOL courses for EFL teachers empower them to function appropriately and professionally in the teaching situation to achieve the desired learning outcomes.

Fariba, 53, says that

Some PD programs such as online learning, doing research, inquiry-based learning, and educational psychology classes are held in my school for teachers. However, they are not enough for

improving teachers' knowledge of teaching. These classes should be coherent and related to teachers' ultimate goals, i.e., students' achievement. I think that teachers should actively engage in their own PL.

Fariba mentions some of the PD programs held in her school for teachers. In her idea, these programs are not coherent, and they are not related to each other. She points out that these programs should be adapted to teachers' goals aiming to improve students' outcomes. She sees students' outcomes as the main goal of teachers and the aim of PL. Hence, coherence and active learning as the two main components of PD are mentioned in her speech.

Theme 2: collaborative learning

It is worth pointing out that cooperation and group work are important factors that improve teachers' professional skills. This theme was supported by two main codes of team teaching and participation in educational seminars and several subcodes.

Fateme, 48, responded to the interview questions as:

I usually participate in PL communities formed through online tools such as Telegram or What's Up. These communities allow English teachers from different countries to gather together and share their information, experiences, and problem-solving strategies with their colleagues through informal discussions. Being in these communities enables me to collaborate with teachers all over the world in solving my teaching problems. Meanwhile, it greatly helps me relearn my teaching practice and find innovative ways to address my needs.

Fatemeh, who is interested in teamwork, emphasizes collaborative learning and believes that by using other English teachers' teaching methods, she can change her teaching practice and act better than before. For her, joining the PL communities helps her to share her teaching experiences and to find new and creative ways to solve students' learning problems. The main point of her remark is that improvement occurs through engaging with the ideas of others. Meanwhile, she sees students' outcomes as a result of teachers' PD. Mojgan pointed out that

Administrators hold some educational seminars where

teachers can meet each other and share their ideas. Collaboration with my colleagues in solving students' learning problems causes me to make responsible decisions in the classroom and to sympathize with my students. Meanwhile, teachers teaching different subjects can consult with each other to explore the most unusual and creative ideas for enhancing students' learning.

For Mojgan, collaboration between the teachers and PL goes hand in hand. She believes that PL through collaboration helps her to be up to date with current methods of teaching English. Moreover, it fosters his empathy with EFL learners and consequently, improves the quality of teaching. Meanwhile, she sees consultation with teachers of other subjects as a beneficial way to explore creative ideas for improving students' learning. Thus, effective PL is collaborative, which focuses on finding ways to enhance students' learning, and PD occurs as a result of teachers' learning from each other.

Theme 3: experienced-based learning

In this phase, the researchers found that teachers could improve their skills in the class by three codes: learning from students, learning through teaching, and learning from experiences. The following includes teachers' experiences in this regard:

Neda, 51, answered our questions in the following ways:

Students' ideas could improve my teaching, and sometimes I invite my students to participate in teaching. Both I learn from my students, and they learn from me too. Hence, students can share valuable ideas about the instructional methods with me. While they teach, I observe their teaching critically, and thereby, I change my performance in the class according to the needs of the students.

For Neda, PL is associated with learning from students. She believes in the effect of mutual learning in which teachers and students can mutually learn and benefit from each other. Hence, by observing students' teaching, he can think critically and creatively about her students' learning and their needs, and accordingly, she can justify her performance. The main point in her remark is that by improving teachers' critical thinking through observation, they can learn innovative teaching methods which are compatible with students' needs.

Fariba answered our questions in the following manner:

Once, one of my students asked me a question in grammar that I did not know the answer. So, I asked the class to search for this question and to prepare their answers for the next session. Through sharing ideas with the students in classroom discussions and with teachers in the rest time and getting feedback from them, I get new information about the topic and try to modify my teaching methods according to this feedback.

Fariba asked students to find the answer to a question she didn't know. Using this technique, she can find enough opportunities to learn from students or colleagues. For Fariba, PL is associated with receiving feedback from students and colleagues. Feedback is important in promoting teachers' PL and can lead to their professional growth. Taking feedback from students and teachers facilitates collaborative learning in which teachers and students work together to create an effective learning environment. Thus, Fariba uses students' active learning to improve her PL skills.

Kamran, 42, answered our questions in the following way:

For me, teaching English is a kind of learning. During my teaching experience, I have learned a lot of life lessons from my students. I have learned that students come from different family and cultural backgrounds; hence, they have different educational needs. So, I have attended many education-related classes that have improved my way of teaching. Meanwhile, I have learned how to deal with students having different personalities. I have taught EFL students for ten years and learned to be honest with them and adapt myself to their needs.

Kamran associates PL with learning from teaching experiences and learning from students. For him, teaching is associated with learning. Respecting students' personal values and understanding their family and cultural background influence his way of teaching, guide her decision-making, and cause him to effectively use teaching strategies based on students' needs.

4.2. Discussion

The current qualitative study showed that Iranian EFL teachers engage in different PL practices, but they also encounter some limitations and difficulties that need to be addressed. Three themes were identified regarding EFL teachers' perceptions of their PL practices: PD programs, collaborative learning, and experience-based learning. In the first theme, teachers complained about the lack of any endeavor from the school or ministry management to motivate them to be lifelong learners. Most teachers believed that the PL programs did not address the needs of EFL teachers but were designed only to fulfill the administrators' goals. There were not any opportunities in the school environment to improve their skills in the target language, and this prevented them from being critical thinkers as Kostianen et al. (2018) referred to. Hence, successful PD programs should be designed to encourage self-direction and autonomy, meeting the needs of individual teachers (Behzadi et al., 2019; Cooper et al., 2022; Soodmand Afshar & Ghasemi, 2020). The interviewees' declarations are in agreement with Prenger et al. (2017) study that developing PL programs is important in ensuring that teachers can learn and apply the practices needed to support the students' social and academic needs. The results of this study showed that EFL teachers were willing to develop themselves as being more professional, especially because of the students' academic success and the dynamics of education in the modern era. Hence despite not being continuous and coherent PD programs for Iranian EFL teachers in schools, they actively improved their PL skills by studying the new trends in English language teaching, enhancing their communication skills, and participating in TEFL or TESOL courses.

In the second theme, PL was conceptualized as teachers engaging in different learning activities within professional communities, seminars, and workshops. Teachers emphasized that by collaborating and using other teachers' ideas, they relearn their teaching practice and change it according to the needs of EFL learners. They believed that collaboration caused them to be up to date with new methods of teaching English to foreign language learners (TEFL) and improved their reflective practice. These results are compatible with the findings of the study conducted by Teslo et al. (2023) who found that teachers' collaboration in PD programs causes them to consciously reflect on their own PL practices.

In the third theme, experience-based learning, teachers put an emphasis on mutual learning among colleagues as well as between students and teachers. The teachers reported activating critical thinking skills by observing students' teaching and sharing ideas with them in class discussions. Hence, student teaching may be considered a main source for teachers' PL, as mentioned by Scheetz (1991). Meanwhile, mutual contact between teachers, students, and teachers' teaching experience have taught them to be honest with students because students come from different family and cultural backgrounds, and this has caused teachers to be flexible in their way of teaching. Flexibility helps teachers to adapt themselves to the needs of the students and results in increased engagement and participation of the students. Therefore, it leads to students' achievement which is an endpoint of teachers' PL (Desimone, 2009).

Teacher education programs are responsible for preparing high-quality teachers for a dynamic, unpredictable, and changing society (Tang et al., 2020). Quality teaching enhances students' learning and emphasizes the necessity for teachers to further develop their PL practices (Labone et al., 2014). The quality teaching and students' achievements are closely related (Goldhaber, 2016). Hence, according to the QTF, developing the skills and knowledge of the teachers is fundamental in achieving good students' outcomes (Miller et al., 2019). Participants in this study mentioned students' outcomes and their mastery of the target language as a key level of EFL teachers' PL. This is similar to Guskey's (2002) model of teacher change and Desimone's (2009) model of PD in which the students' outcomes are considered as the endpoint of PL. Meanwhile, the three themes overlapped in such a way that the teachers could share experiences, feedback, and ideas with their colleagues and students and this, in turn, could promote students' outcomes and foster a culture of learning as emphasized by QTF (Miller et al., 2019).

The findings of this study showed that PL can be described through the constructivist approach in which the teacher is considered an active learner who is responsible for his or her learning and can construct his or her change within a different context (Labone & Long, 2016; Roesken, 2011). Active learning which is one of the central features of PD (Desimone, 2009) and is highly emphasized in QTF (Gore, 2007) was represented in this study by 1) knowledge construction through participation in PD programs and different learning tasks; 2) knowledge construction through collaboration; and 3) knowledge construction through experience and receiving feedback

from students. These findings are compatible with the results of the study conducted by Niemi et al. (2016), who explored student teachers' PL and professional competence in Finnish and Turkish contexts. The participants (N=728) evaluated their experiences of active learning and the professional competencies they got during teacher education. The findings showed three aspects of teachers' active learning: learning through engaging in learning tasks, linking theoretical concepts with real-world contexts, and sharing knowledge with peers. Meanwhile the other features of PD, such as collective participation, duration, content focus, and coherence presented by Desimone (2009), have been mentioned by the participants in this study as the core elements improving teachers' PL. Thereby, these elements create the changes in the instructional methods and improve students' outcomes. Thus, teachers' PL activities share a common purpose of creating enduring changes in teachers' practices, attitudes, and beliefs (Guskey, 2002) as proved by the results of this study.

To improve their PL skills, teachers should collaborate with a broad range of stakeholders and other teachers across communities and schools (Bennett & Livingston, 2018). Collaborative learning as a method of teachers' PD has been emphasized by the participants in this study. In fact, according to Vygotsky's (1978) zone of proximal development, effective learning occurs when the learner has the chance to interact well with others and with the environment. This supports the idea that collaboration among teachers may be useful in improving their PL (Duncombe & Armour, 2004). According to Van der Bij et al. (2016), teacher collaboration can lead to participative decision-making and can be considered a stimulating factor in teachers' PL and quality teaching. The results of this study showed that teachers relied on each other's ideas on having responsible decision-making, being a problem solver, and sympathizing with students. Hence, social support which is an aspect of the quality learning environment in QTF is considered an important part of teachers' PL. In fact, most teachers were willing to use other teachers' experiences. They believed that collaboration with other teachers helped them to learn new skills and change their teaching practice. Therefore, PL can be a meaningful experience when teachers share their ideas and produce a valuable experience meeting the needs of other colleagues (Cochran-Smith et al., 2020).

According to the results of this study, planning for PD programs can be more effective if administrators concentrate on the teachers' needs, the necessity for teachers to recognize better ways of doing things, and the multi-

dimensionality of PD (Evans, 2014). The main problem of Iranian EFL teachers, as mentioned by Cooper et al. (2020), is that teachers' concerns and needs are not taken into consideration in designing PD programs. Meanwhile, teachers are regarded as knowledge consumers rather than knowledge producers.

Some teachers indicated that they learn from everyday classroom activities and students. Therefore, being involved in classroom activities forms dynamic teaching that provides a suitable condition for teachers' collaboration and PL (Rachmajanti et al., 2020). Moreover, teachers' professional discussions with students and other colleagues may improve their intellectual quality skills like critical thinking, and can make learning experiences more meaningful (Kostiainen et al., 2018). In such cases, teachers and students become a part of the education system (Hamre et al., 2012). This causes fundamental changes in the teaching and learning process.

5. Conclusion and Implications

The purpose of this study was to explore Iranian EFL teachers' perceptions of their PL practices. The results showed that teachers' PL occurs when they participate in continual and coherent school-based learning over a long period, when teachers work collaboratively in the school or in the PL community, when they interact with their students, and when they have an active role in learning and changing their own teaching practice. Promoting teachers' PL skills improves the teaching quality, which is considered the most important factor affecting students' outcomes (Gore et al., 2017). The participants in this study mentioned that PL was necessary for improving students' proficiency in learning English; hence, they considered outcome as a key element of EFL teachers' PL.

This study has significant implications for policymakers, school administrators, and teacher educators. Policymakers need to assign enough time and resources for teachers' PL to enable them to change their teaching practices according to the students' needs. Meanwhile, school administrators can create both group and individual PD programs for EFL teachers. Teachers not only need help as individuals in their specific workplace but also in their collaborative learning, which allows them to collaborate on complex and challenging issues to improve teaching and learning for all students (Grimm, 2022). Finally, teacher educators should develop a variety of PL interventions for teachers by focusing on their specific needs. This focus on teachers' needs

recognizes the value of teachers' PL as something unique for each person (Woodcock & Hardy, 2023).

Some limitations are imposed in this study. First, this study used a purposeful sampling method. Further studies may employ other sampling methods, such as random sampling, to recruit English teachers from diverse backgrounds, including those who work in rural places. The second limitation of this study refers to its mere qualitative nature and the researchers' subjectivity. This study solely relied on the participants' comments in focus group interviews, semi-structured interviews, and narrative inquiries. Other studies are recommended to conduct the related study through the mixed methods of quantitative and qualitative study to deeply investigate EFL teachers' PL practices in different social, cultural, and economic aspects. The third limitation of this study refers to its data analysis method. The data were analyzed through thematic analysis. Further studies could be conducted with other data analysis methods like content analysis to enhance the trustworthiness of the data.

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Appendix

Interview Questions

1. What were the most important things you have learned in the past?
2. What types of professional learning activities have you participated in to improve your teaching practice?
3. How do you stay up-to-date with the latest teaching strategies and techniques in the EFL field?
4. How do you reflect on your teaching practice, and what changes have you made as a result of your reflections?
5. What are your long-term goals for your teaching profession in the EFL field?
6. What are the barriers to professional learning in your country?
7. What is your opinion about learning from colleagues?
8. Tell me a story of a learning experience that you have had as a teacher.