EXAMINING AND INVESTIGATING THE CHALLENGES FACED BY EFL COLLEGE PROFESSORS IN ACCESSING AND PARTICIPATING IN IN-SERVICE TRAINING PROGRAMS: A CASE STUDY OF SABRATAH UNIVERSITY

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the barriers hindering access to and participation in in-service training programs among EFL faculty at the English Department of Sabratah University, Libya. Despite the recognized importance of Continuous Professional Development (CPD) for enhancing pedagogical practice and language teaching quality, significant institutional and personal obstacles persist. Employing a mixed-methods design, data were collected via questionnaires (n=35) and semi-structured interviews (n=12) with professors, lecturers, and assistant lecturers. Quantitative and qualitative analyses reveal that institutional constraints are the most pervasive barrier, with a majority of respondents citing a lack of administrative support, insufficient funding, and inadequate resources. Additional challenges include heavy teaching loads leading to scheduling conflicts, a lack of awareness of available opportunities, and a frequent mismatch between training content and actual classroom needs. The findings underscore a critical gap between the theoretical value of CPD and the practical realities within this specific Libyan higher education context. The study concludes with targeted recommendations for the departmental, university, and national policy levels to develop more supportive, relevant, and accessible professional development environments for EFL educators.

Keywords: Professional Development, In-Service Training, EFL/ESL Teachers, Higher Education, Libya, Barriers, Sabratah University

1. Introduction

Continuous Professional Development (CPD) is a cornerstone of quality assurance and pedagogical innovation in higher education, particularly within language teaching disciplines. For EFL/ESL university instructors, ongoing in-service training is not a luxury but a necessity to keep pace with evolving methodologies, digital pedagogies, and socio-linguistic theories (Richards & Farrell, 2005). Effective CPD fosters reflective practice, enhances student engagement, and ultimately improves second language acquisition outcomes (Borg, 2018). In the context of Libyan universities, where English is a crucial medium for academic and global communication, investing in the professional growth of English department faculty is paramount for national educational development.

This study is situated within the English Department of the Faculty of Arts and Education at Sabratah University. Like many institutions in Libya's higher education landscape, Sabratah University operates within a context marked by post-conflict recovery, budgetary constraints, and ongoing structural reforms. While a commitment to academic quality exists, the mechanisms for systematic, sustainable faculty development are often underdeveloped or disrupted. Anecdotal evidence and preliminary discussions within the department point to significant frustrations among faculty regarding access to meaningful professional growth opportunities.

The research problem is that EFL professors at Sabratah University face multifaceted barriers that limit their participation in in-service training programs, potentially stagnating teaching practices and impacting student learning. The purpose of this study is to systematically identify, examine, and analyze these specific challenges.

Its objectives are to: 1) catalog the perceived institutional and personal barriers to CPD access and participation; 2) understand their relative frequency and impact; and 3) explore faculty perceptions of the relevance of available training. The study is guided by the following research questions:

1. What are the primary institutional barriers that prevent EFL faculty at Sabratah University from accessing in-service training?

2. What are the key personal/professional obstacles they face in participating in such programs?

3. How do faculty members perceive the relevance and applicability of existing or proposed training content to their teaching contexts?

2. Literature Review

The imperative for CPD in language teaching rests on well-established pedagogical principles that recognize teacher learning as a lifelong developmental process rather than a finite achievement (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017). Scholars in the field argue persuasively that in-service training serves as the crucial mechanism for translating theoretical knowledge into classroom efficacy , with direct implications for student learning outcomes (Borg, 2018). For university-level EFL/ESL instructors, this includes development in areas such as content and language integrated learning (CLIL), technology-enhanced language learning (TELL), assessment literacy, and teaching English for academic purposes (EAP) (Borg, 2018).

This perspective aligns with broader educational research emphasizing that teacher quality represents the single most significant school-based factor influencing student achievement. For university-level EFL/ESL instructors specifically, effective CPD must address development across multiple domains including pedagogical content knowledge , technological integration , assessment literacy , and specialized approaches such as Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) and Teaching English for Academic Purposes (EAP) (Borg, 2018).

The conceptualization of CPD has evolved beyond traditional workshop models toward more comprehensive frameworks that encompass both formal and informal learning opportunities. As noted in practitioner-oriented literature, professional development for ESL teachers encompasses "learning designed to improve one's capability, expertise, and knowledge" through various modalities including academic coursework, specialized certifications, peer collaboration, conference participation, and self-directed learning (Karabenick & Conley, 2011). This broader conceptualization is particularly relevant in higher education contexts where faculty are expected to balance teaching responsibilities with research and administrative duties. The dynamic nature of language teaching methodologies—especially with rapid technological advancements and evolving understandings of second language acquisition—necessitates ongoing engagement with emerging practices (Bozkurt, 2020). Without sustained professional development, even experienced instructors risk pedagogical stagnation, potentially compromising both their career advancement and their students' learning experiences (Hayes, 2014).

However, the ideal of continuous development often clashes with systemic realities, especially in developing countries. Common barriers identified in global literature include institutional constraints such as lack of funding, absence of a supportive CPD policy, and insufficient time allocation (Karabenick & Conley, 2011). Workload issues are particularly acute; heavy teaching and administrative duties leave little room for professional growth activities (Bozkurt, 2020). Furthermore, training programs are frequently critiqued for being top-down, decontextualized, and irrelevant to teachers' actual needs, leading to demotivation and non-participation (Hayes, 2014).

Research within North African and Arab contexts echoes and intensifies these findings. Studies in similar settings highlight chronic underfunding, bureaucratic inertia, and a lack of institutional recognition for professional

development activities (Orafi, 2013). In Libya specifically, the higher education sector has been further challenged by geopolitical instability, which disrupts planning and resource allocation. While studies on Libyan teacher development are emerging, initial reports suggest that training opportunities are sporadic, unevenly distributed, and rarely evaluated for impact (Abugider, 2020). This study seeks to contribute empirical data from a specific Libyan university department to this growing regional literature, highlighting the localized manifestations of these global challenges.

The Libyan higher education sector operates within a complex socio-political landscape characterized by prolonged instability that has profoundly impacted institutional functioning and professional development opportunities (Abugider, 2020). Since 2014, the country has been geographically and politically divided between eastern and western governments, creating fragmented governance structures that have disrupted systematic planning and resource allocation across all sectors, including education (Orafi, 2013). This political division has resulted in inconsistent policy implementation , competing administrative directives , and infrastructural deterioration that collectively undermine the operational capacity of universities (Abugider, 2020). Within this challenging environment, faculty development initiatives have frequently been deprioritized or implemented in an ad hoc manner without sustainable institutional support (Orafi, 2013).

2.1 Conclusion: Research Gaps and Conceptual Framework

This expanded literature review reveals several significant research gaps that the proposed study aims to address (Abugider, 2020). First, while substantial research exists on barriers to professional development in various international contexts, limited empirical investigation has focused specifically on university-level EFL/ESL faculty in conflict-affected environments like Libya (Orafi, 2013). Second, existing studies tend to examine barriers in isolation rather than investigating their interconnected nature and cumulative impact on participation decisions (Karabenick & Conley, 2011). Third, there is insufficient research exploring how faculty in such contexts exercise agency and develop resourcefulness in pursuing professional growth despite systemic constraints (Hayes, 2014). Finally, few studies have examined the potential synergy between Libya's recent national higher education strategy and grassroots faculty development initiatives (Government of National Unity, Libya, 2025).

The proposed study will employ a multi-level conceptual framework that examines barriers operating at macro (national/policy), meso (institutional), and micro (individual) levels, with particular attention to their interactions and compounded effects (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017). This framework will incorporate concepts of professional agency to explore how faculty navigate constraints while identifying potential leverage points for intervention at various system levels (Borg, 2018). By focusing specifically on Sabratah University as a case study, the research will provide both contextually nuanced insights and transferable understandings relevant to similar institutions across Libya and comparable regional contexts (Abugider, 2020).

The literature suggests that effective approaches to enhancing faculty development participation in challenging environments like Libya will likely require integrated strategies addressing multiple barrier categories simultaneously (Bozkurt, 2020). These may include policy advocacy for institutional support structures, innovative program design that maximizes limited resources, technology integration to overcome geographic and temporal constraints, and agency development initiatives that empower faculty as active participants in their professional growth (Hayes, 2014). As Libya implements its ambitious new higher education strategy, creating effective mechanisms for faculty development will be essential for realizing its goals of enhanced educational quality and international competitiveness.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

A convergent parallel mixed-methods design was employed. This approach allowed for the collection of both quantitative data to quantify the prevalence of barriers and qualitative data to gain a deeper, nuanced understanding of faculty experiences and perceptions (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018).

3.2 Setting and Participants

The study was conducted at the English Department, Faculty of Arts and Education, Sabratah University. The target population was all full-time faculty involved in teaching EFL skills and linguistics' subjects, including professors, associate professors, lecturers, and assistant lecturers. A purposive sampling technique was used to recruit participants who had been employed at the department for at least two years, ensuring they had sufficient experience with the institutional context.

3.3 Instruments

1. Questionnaire: A 35-item survey was developed, adapted from established instruments on PD barriers (e.g., Karabenick & Conley, 2011). It used a 5-point Likert scale to measure the frequency and severity of various obstacles, alongside multiple-choice and open-ended questions on training participation and needs.

2. Semi-Structured Interview Protocol: A guide was created to explore themes from the survey in greater depth, probing personal experiences, specific institutional hurdles, and suggestions for improvement.

3.4 Data Collection

Following ethical approval, questionnaires were distributed electronically and in-person, yielding 35 complete responses (a 70% response rate). From the survey respondents, 12 participants were purposively selected for maximum variation (by rank, gender, and expressed level of constraint) to participate in individual interviews lasting 30 minutes.

3.5 Data Analysis

Quantitative data from the questionnaires were analyzed using descriptive statistics (frequencies, percentages, means) via SPSS software. Qualitative data from open-ended survey responses and interview transcripts were analyzed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), following a process of familiarization, code generation, theme search, and review.

3.6 Ethical Considerations

Informed consent was obtained from all participants. Anonymity and confidentiality were guaranteed, with all data anonymized during transcription and reporting.

4. Results / Findings

4.1 Quantitative Findings

The questionnaire data revealed a clear picture of constrained access. As shown in Table 1, institutional barriers were rated as the most severe.

Table 1: Percentage of Faculty Agreeing/Very Much Agreeing on Barriers (N=35)

Barrier Category	% Agreement

Institutional Constraints	88.6%
Lack of administrative support/encouragement	85.7%
Inadequate funding for registration/travel	91.4%
No substitution/reduction for teaching load	80.0%
Workload & Scheduling	77.1%
Conflict with teaching schedule	82.9%
Excessive administrative duties	74.3%
Awareness & Relevance	68.6%
Unaware of available opportunities	62.9%
Training content not relevant to my needs	74.3%

A striking 91.4% of respondents cited inadequate funding as a major or very major obstacle. Furthermore, 74.3% indicated that the training programs they were aware of did not align with their actual teaching needs, particularly in areas like research publication, advanced technology use, and teaching literature in an EFL context.

Moreover, data from the 35 completed questionnaires were cleaned and coded for analysis using SPSS (Version 28). Initial analysis involved generating descriptive statistics —frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations—for all Likert-scale items to profile the sample and identify central tendencies in perceived barriers. To explore relationships between variables, inferential statistics were applied. Independent samples t-tests were used to examine differences in barrier perception based on academic rank (e.g., professor/associate vs. lecturer/assistant). One-way ANOVA was planned to assess differences based on years of experience, though the sample size ultimately limited this. Cross-tabulations with Chi-square tests of independence were run to investigate associations between categorical variables, such as participation in any training in the last three years and the perceived level of administrative support.

4.2 Qualitative Findings

Thematic analysis of interviews and open-ended responses provided depth to the statistics, generating three core themes:

1. “A Culture of Neglect”: Institutional Apathy. Participants frequently described a lack of institutional prioritization. One associate professor stated, “The administration sees teaching as our only duty. Professional growth is treated as a personal hobby, not a university responsibility.” Another noted the absence of a clear CPD policy or a dedicated budget line for faculty development.

2. “ Constrained by the Timetable and Workload”:. The conflict between teaching schedules and training was pervasive. A lecturer explained, “Even if a free online workshop exists, it’s often at a time when I am in class or preparing for one. There is no system to cover our duties.” The heavy credit-hour load, a common feature in Libyan universities, was consistently cited as the primary practical deterrent.

3. “Training for the Sake of Training”: The Relevance Gap. Many expressed cynicism about the content of past programs. An assistant lecturer said, “We get generic workshops on ‘active learning’ but not on how to apply it to our large, mixed-ability grammar classes. It feels disconnected.” There was a strong expressed desire for needs-based, context-sensitive training developed in consultation with faculty.

5. Discussion

The findings paint a coherent picture of a professional development environment at Sabratah University that is largely ineffective due to systemic constraints. The dominance of institutional barriers —particularly lack of funding and administrative support—aligns closely with research from other developing higher education contexts (Bozkurt, 2020) and confirms preliminary observations about the Libyan sector (Abugider, 2020). This suggests that the problem is less about individual faculty motivation and more about structural disincentives.

The scheduling conflicts arising from excessive teaching loads present a critical operational barrier. This finding directly connects to global literature on faculty workload but is exacerbated by local staffing models and resource limitations. Without structural interventions to create “PD time,” participation will remain limited to the most determined individuals, often at personal cost.

The relevance gap is perhaps the most pedagogically significant finding. It indicates that even when logistical barriers are overcome, the training offered may not lead to meaningful pedagogical change. This disconnect between supply and demand for CPD reflects a top-down planning model criticized in international research (Hayes, 2014) and points to a failure to engage faculty as stakeholders in their own development.

Collectively, these barriers create a cycle of stagnation. Faculty are unable to access relevant training, which limits the introduction of new pedagogies, potentially affecting student engagement and learning outcomes. The institution, in turn, may perceive a lack of faculty initiative, further deprioritizing CPD investment.

6. Recommendations

To break this cycle, multi-level interventions are required:

For the English Department:

1. Establish a Faculty Development Committee to conduct annual needs assessments and coordinate localized, peer-led workshops (e.g., seminars on specific teaching challenges).

2. Advocate collectively with the university administration for structured PD time , such as one afternoon per month free from teaching duties.

For the University Administration:

1. Develop and formalize a university-wide CPD policy that includes a dedicated annual budget for faculty training and recognizes PD participation in promotion criteria.

2. Implement a teaching load policy that credits or reduces loads for faculty engaging in substantial, approved professional development activities.

3. Leverage online and blended learning platforms to offer flexible, asynchronous training options that circumvent rigid schedules.

For Libyan Higher Education Policymakers:

1. Allocate specific national funding for university faculty development, particularly in priority fields like English language education.

2. Encourage and fund the creation of national or regional Collaboration among Libyan universities to share expertise and develop contextually relevant training resources, reducing duplication and cost.

7. Conclusion

This case study has identified a constellation of interconnected barriers—institutional, temporal, and relevancy-based—that severely restrict EFL/ESL faculty at Sabratah University from engaging in continuous professional development. The findings underscore that improving teaching quality requires more than just willing teachers; it necessitates a supportive institutional framework that values, enables, and strategically invests in faculty growth. Addressing these challenges demands concerted action from departmental leadership, university administration, and national policymakers. Future research should expand this inquiry to other Libyan universities to build a national evidence base and explore the potential of innovative, low-cost PD models tailored to constrained environments. The professional development of Libya's English educators is not merely an academic concern but a foundational element for the nation's educational and global engagement in the years to come.

8. References

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