

Teachers' Perspectives towards Online Professional Development Programs during the Period of COVID-19 Pandemic in the Saudi EFL Context

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This study aimed to explore a group of teachers' perspectives on the effectiveness of online professional development programs in the Saudi English context. To achieve this main research objective, a five-point Likert scale with 21 items belonging to four essential dimensions was carried out on 537 English teachers using the snowball sampling method. The data was collected online through a Google Form-generated link. The study's findings revealed that English teachers' perceptions of the effectiveness of online professional development programs presented to them during the pandemic of Covid-19 were relatively high. No statistically significant differences were found due to gender, age, experience, or qualifications regarding teachers' perceptions of the effectiveness of online professional development programs. However, there were statistically significant differences in the efficiency of these programs between teachers who have attended these programs and those who have not in favour of the former. On the basis of these findings, limitations and recommendations were put forward .

Keywords: Covid-19, EFL teachers, English, online professional development programs, perspectives, Saudi context.

Recently, the COVID-19 pandemic led the world into unprecedented crises in all fields of life. However, it has also expedited the development of technologies and mass integration of processes around remote work, education, and training. The influence of information and communication technology on establishing new ways to offer training has been deemed advantageous in education (Rosa, 2016). Furthermore, over the previous decade, there has been a surge in Online Professional Development Programs (OPDPs). According to Hartshorne et al. (2020), the COVID-19 pandemic, in particular, has accelerated the development, involvement in, and demand for online courses and activities. Consequently, the purported advantages of enhanced access, networking,

flexibility, and cheaper costs of providing teachers with online professional development (PD) have come to be regarded as trustworthy and well-entrenched.

The need to include digital technology in education, particularly OPDPs, has been actively debated in educational theory and practise over the last 20 years. Thus, developing teachers' professional competencies and identities within the online environment is essential for future research and training (Orak & Al-khresheh, 2021). Ferdig et al., (2020) state that the primary goal of OPDPs is to train instructors on how to teach online. Similarly, Vadivel et al., (2021) also mention that an educator who has been allowed to absorb something valuable can unavoidably deliver the alike to their students. According to Wuryaningsih et al., (2019), improving teacher PD in the digital era by employing web-based learning appears to be a fundamental breakthrough in strengthening teachers' skills. Furthermore, the educational efficiency of the online modality is thought to be equivalent to conventional methods, with OPDP providers claiming they can provide access and delivery benefits to reach more individuals at low prices (Lay et al., 2020).

This study aims to assess the effectiveness of OPDPs presented to English-as-a-Foreign-Language (EFL) teachers during the COVID-19 pandemic (2020-2022). The outcomes of this study might offer academics and policymakers useful information to understand EFL teachers' perspectives of OPDPs to equip them with suitable, effective, and engaging programs. Investigating the elements that influence teachers' impressions of attending OPDPs may aid in comprehending the aspects that contribute to an effective delivery process. Predictably, the study's findings would encourage educational institutions to deliver effective and suitable OPDPs that enhance EFL instructors' teaching skills. There is a marked scarcity of similarly scoped research in the Saudi setting. The current study seeks to address this gap and contribute to existing knowledge by exploring EFL teachers' perceptions of the efficacy of OPDPs in the Saudi EFL context. Given this, the current study seeks to answer the following questions:

1. How do teachers perceive the effectiveness of OPDPs during the COVID-19 pandemic in the Saudi EFL context?
2. Do EFL teachers' perceptions of the effectiveness of OPDPs during the COVID-19 pandemic diverge noticeably in terms of gender, age, experience, qualifications, and attendance of such professional programs?

Literature Review

Recently, the COVID-19 pandemic expedited the transition of the educational paradigm from traditional classroom delivery to online formats, requiring teachers to rapidly adapt to new learning and teaching environments (Al-khresheh, 2021a). Teachers needed to learn and use online tools like learning management systems (LMS), discussion boards, online examination tools, and ways to engage students online. Most EFL teachers had never used these platforms before the COVID 19 pandemic. As a result, it has further boosted the need for the PD of teachers. Therefore, there was a need for urgent and immediate training for the teachers. In the pandemic situation, this gap was successfully filled through OPDPs provided by educational institutions and organisations. In this section, the prevalent views and relevant research regarding the need and effectiveness of OPDPs, in general, are discussed, in addition to a specific overview of those presented to EFL teachers in Saudi Arabia during the COVID-19 pandemic.

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According to Ahadi et al., (2021), most studies in existing systematic reviews have not used complete PD evaluation models to evaluate teacher PD workshops. As a result, validating the significance of OPDPs and investigating whether they have the same qualities that traditional PD programs enjoy bears significance. Improving teachers' quality of instruction via teacher PD programs has been a top priority in many nations. Since its inception, PD has undergone several changes (Al-khresheh, 2021b; Elliott, 2017; Yates, 2007). Furthermore, according to Hiebert (1999), studies on teacher learning point out that compelling chances to learn new-fangled teaching methods have numerous essential features, such as: "(a) ongoing collaboration of teachers for purposes of planning, with (b) the explicit goal of improving students' achievement of clear learning goals, (c) anchored by attention to students' thinking, the curriculum, and pedagogy, with (d) access to alternative ideas and methods and opportunities to observe" them in action, enabling reflections on the causes for their effectiveness (p.15). However, all these features correspond to the pre-COVID-19 situation. There was a need to reform these features to consider the needs of teachers and students during the COVID-19 for the successful teaching-learning process.

Previously, Fullan (1991) asserted that PD is the totality of one's formal and informal learning experiences during one's career. Later on, Fishman (2016) defined PD as learning activities concerning the teaching profession conducted after the first certification. In this context, online PD corresponds to teachers' learning experiences given partially or entirely over the internet with the potential to deliver high-quality teacher learning experiences (Fishman et al., 2013). Teacher development assessment serves two primary purposes: (a) better understanding staff development so that it may be reinforced, and (b) determining the impact of staff development on its intended goals (Guskey, 2000). Teachers must be given PD to provide them with the foundation necessary to improve their performance in the classroom (Charalambos & Zembylas, 2004). This includes joint or individual development, continual education, curriculum development, team dynamics and group work, and pre and in-service education (Charalambos & Zembylas, 2004; Khan et al., 2021).

There are vital elements of transformative learning in the PD process for teachers, which occur when they transition away from being directly instructed on what to do towards the more comprehensive paradigm of assuming responsibility for their PD and leveraging independent learning and problem-solving abilities to improve themselves (Risko & Vogt, 2016). Thus, PD is positioned within the theoretical framework of transformational learning. Many scholars see transformational learning theory as the cornerstone of teacher PD since PD, Continuous Professional Development (CPD), and Teacher's Continuous Professional Development (TCPD) are all major components of adult learning (Al-Bargi, 2021; Sanchez, 2018; Shah et al., 2015). However, this continuity in the PD of teachers may be interrupted by unforeseen mega-events and incidents that cause global level changes, such as the paradigm shift in the teaching-learning methods across the globe during Covid-19.

Transformative learning influences the development of students' action theories, self-efficacy, and professional characteristics in teacher education (Aziz & Quraishi, 2017; Jones, 2009). According to Mezirow (2012), it goes through six stages: "1) a disorienting dilemma; 2) self-critical assessment of assumptions; 3) recognition through

discourse that others share assumptions; 4) exploration of new ideas and relationships; 5) planning a course of action; and 6) taking action based on the new perspective developed through this process" (p. 22).

Much empirical research has identified attributes that contribute to effective PD. However, such research is limited to regional contexts, and the body of work presenting teachers' opinions on PDPs internationally is limited (Ling et al., 2021). Although, it has been recognised that ensuring instructors can provide targeted instruction to students requires high-quality and accessible PD. These factors have motivated educational institutions to improve teaching quality (Dana et al., 2021; Teräs, 2016; Mahdi & Aldera, 2013).

The two essential aspects of good PD are expanding teachers' subject-specific content and pedagogical knowledge, including understanding how students learn and experimenting with different delivery methods (Vadivel et al., 2021; Garet et al., 1999).

Taylor (2011) identified three reasons participants chose to take an online PD course: compliance with teacher certification criteria, interest and relevance, and convenience (time). Additionally, Russell et al., (2009) found a positive correlation between having taken OPDPs and eagerness to take them in the future. On the other hand, teachers who had only taken face-to-face PDs were less eager to experience the online format. Such findings corroborate further research that has found OPDPs to be a highly effective PD tool, particularly during the pandemic (Berndt et al., 2017; Poole et al., 2020; Pradeep, 2021; Turcsányi-Szabó, 2008). Erickson et al. (2012) further highlight that OPDP-trained teachers improved their capacity to incorporate research-based methods into their teaching practices. However, OPDPs must integrate research-based teacher education, adult learning, and online learning to have this effect. Adult learner concepts are beneficial as they recognise that participants as self-directed, experienced, goal-oriented individuals motivated to enhance their knowledge and skillset (Knowles et al., 2011).

DeAngelis et al. (2013) investigated whether PD qualities influenced instructors' utilisation of new knowledge and abilities and their influence on student learning outcomes. As judged by classroom observation scores, active learning in the classroom had a minor but significant link with instructors' application of new knowledge and abilities. On the other hand, Lewis (2002) mentioned that the NSDC in the United States rates just 10% of what teachers learn in typical PD events is interminably implemented in the classroom.

Collins and Liang (2015) highlighted five essential markers of high-quality OPDPs: 1) content relevance; 2) online features and delivery quality; 3) online involvement and length; 4) transformational learning for instructional methods; and 5) adult learning theory. According to OPDP providers, the online environment presented an intriguing alternative for a high-quality service statewide deployment. High-quality OPDPs must consider several factors, including prioritising content quality, leveraging active learning, implementing proven practice models, and facilitating collaboration. Such instruction can be further amplified by providing coaching, expert assistance, ample

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feedback, and an ongoing PD process (Archibald et al., 2011; Collins & Liang, 2015; Darling-Hammond et al., 2017).

Moreover, three elements make an OPDP effective compared to face-to-face PD: 1) OPDPs are flexible as the boundaries of time and place are diminished; 2) OPD participants have greater access to various content types and a wider variety of PD resources, and 3) it offers greater efficiency in terms of time and money spent on traditional PD programs. However, technology usage can be a limitation as the facilitator and participants should know the necessary technological tools to benefit from such a setting. Additionally, The unavailability of suitable technological tools can hinder the smooth commencement of an OPDP (Truong & Murray, 2020). Finally, researchers have further stated the importance of human connection in face-to-face and OPDPs (Hürsen, 2012; Elliott, 2017; Poole et al., 2020; Tweed, 2013).

Several studies, including those by Alghamdi and Li (2011), Alshaikhi (2020), and Al-Bargi (2021), have addressed the realities of PD for teachers in Saudi Arabia. Alghamdi and Li (2011) evaluated Saudi Arabian CPD programs from design, execution, and assessment perspectives. Their research provided several recommendations to overcome the challenges that limit the effectiveness of such programs. As Alghamdi (2018) discovered, 89% of faculty members felt the knowledge they had learned started to dissipate within three months of the program, despite their initial enthusiasm for what they anticipated learning from the workshops. Further investigation identified preoccupation with typical job responsibilities as the primary contributing factor, limiting their time to apply what they learned to their classrooms.

According to Alshaikhi (2020), many teachers prefer self-directed learning over official offerings due to its situatedness in their environment, speciality's nature, and the evolving nature of their careers. As shown in instructors' current practices, networking, cooperation, collegiality, and reflection are amongst the primary characteristics of self-directed learning. Furthermore, Alzahrani and Althaqafi (2020) discovered restrictions in teachers' positive views of OPD course segments, teachers' learning, and their use of innovative skills and information in research. So, COVID-19 allowed teachers to select PD sessions of their choice and need, free of cost, from a vast list of programs offered by various authentic resources like Cambridge and Oxford University Press.

Although these studies concentrated on teachers' PD in Saudi Arabia, they did not adequately investigate their perceptions of OPDPs during the COVID 19 pandemic in terms of the four dimensions presented in this study tool: 1) transformational learning for instructional practices; 2) perceptions of OPDP quality features during COVID-19; 3) online participation and duration of OPDPs during COVID-19, and 4) online features and delivery quality of OPDPs during COVID-19. Furthermore, these studies did not examine whether there are statistically significant differences due to gender, age, experience, qualifications, and, most importantly, the effectiveness of these programs for those who participated compared in OPDPs during COVID-19 to those who did not participate.

This study attempts to fill the gaps found in the previous studies. It argues that there was an abundance of OPDPs during the COVID 19 pandemic, providing EFL teachers with easy access to the sessions of their choice from well-renowned trainers in

the comforts of their homes. However, this flood of information also made it difficult for teachers to choose suitable PD sessions, keep track of their learning and then apply it in the online classes during COVID-19 distance learning. It negatively affected teachers' engagement and motivational level towards such PD sessions.

Method

Study Design

This study aimed to explore teachers' perspectives on the effectiveness of OPDPs presented during the COVID-19 pandemic (2020-2022) in the Saudi EFL context. A cross-sectional quantitative approach was used to collect data for the benefits of increased sample size and faster information collection. A questionnaire was distributed to the target sample using the snowball sampling method. This method was chosen because it gives the researcher(s) a reasonable chance to get populations that are challenging to sample compared to other sampling methods (Gay & Airasian, 2005). Additionally, the process is simple and cost-efficient and does not require much planning compared to other sampling techniques (Snyder, 2019).

Participants

The study participants included 537 male and female EFL teachers aged 25 - 60 years old. Their teaching experience ranged from 1 to more than 15 years. They all have taught English online through the pandemic, meaning they have appropriate and relevant experience to participate in this study. Belonging to various nationalities, they all work in Saudi Arabia as EFL teachers. They also have varying qualifications (e.g., bachelor's, master's, and PhD degrees). Furthermore, the majority of them have attended different PD programs during the COVID-19 pandemic, as stated in their responses to the questionnaire. Their statistical characteristics are represented in Table 1.

Table 1
Characteristics of Participants

	Variables	Frequency	Percent
Gender	Male	226	43.8%
	Female	290	56.2%
Age	≤25 years	49	9.5%
	26-30 years old	103	20.0%
	31-40 years	170	32.9%
	41-50 years	121	23.4%
	51-60 years	61	11.8%
	60 years old above	12	2.3%
Experience	1-5 years	138	26.7%
	6-10 years	166	32.2%
	11-15 years	122	23.6%
	more than 15 years	90	17.4%
Qualification	Bachelor	136	26.4%
	Master	251	48.6%
	PhD	129	25.0%
OPDPs	Yes	384	74.4%
Attendance	No	132	25.6%

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Instrument

The questionnaire was the primary tool utilised in this study and was selected for the following reasons: 1) it would provide control over variations, limiting its influence; 2) enable in-depth investigation of the phenomenon; 3) offer respondents flexibility regarding where and when they can complete their questionnaire; and 4) also enable acquiring a better understanding of an existing case (Babbie, 2005; Gay & Airasian, 2005; Siddaway et al., 2019).

The study adopted Collins and Liang's (2015) online teachers' PD questionnaire. The questionnaire included 21 Likert scale items, each containing five choices (1=Strongly Disagree, 2=Disagree, 3=Neutral, 4=Agree, and 5=Strongly Agree). All the questionnaire items assessed information about participants' online experiences and the quality of the OPDPs they had recently attended. The questionnaire's items were divided into four major categories: 1) the first four items assessed details about participants' perceptions of OPDPs Quality Features; 2) the second eight items involved details about Online Features and Delivery Quality, 3) the following five items concerned Online Participation and Duration, and 4) the last four items dealt with Transformational Learning for Instructional Practices. The questionnaire has been validated in several studies and has demonstrated effectiveness in assessing online teachers' PD across multiple studies (Al-Bargi, 2021; Collins & Liang, 2015).

Data Collection and Analysis

Due to COVID-19 restrictions, the data was collected online over two months at the end of the second semester of the 2020-2021 academic year. At the time of data collection, the participants had been teaching remotely for almost 18 months, during which they had attended PD training programs. The survey was generated electronically by Google Forms and then sent to the study participants using the snowballing method, i.e., the Google Form link was sent to a group of EFL teachers, and they were requested to circulate it. The aim of the study was clarified and introduced on the first page of the questionnaire. Moreover, the Google Form link was shared multiple times to reach the entire intended sample population. It was confirmed that all data would be retained private and would not be revealed except for this study.

The collected data was then coded and analysed with SPSS version 26. The data analysis included descriptive measures for variables at each level of measurement. Data was represented through the tabulation method using Microsoft Office Excel. Frequency, percentage, means, and standard deviations were presented. Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) was then employed to discover the statistical significance of the study's variables. Pearson's correlation was similarly used to determine the importance of the relationship between quantitative variables.

Reliability and Validity of the Questionnaire

An internal consistency test was carried out through the SPSS software to check the reliability of the questionnaire. The reliability of the quantitative data was assessed by calculating the Cronbach's Alpha coefficient of the questionnaire's psychometric properties. The internal consistency of the Cronbach's Alpha value was 0.864, statistically considered a good value (Gay & Airasian, 2005), as depicted in Table 2 below. It also shows that the items had a statistically significant correlation to the

dimension they belonged to. The table shows the correlation coefficients between the degree of each item and the overall degree of the dimension to which the item belongs in the questionnaire. All the indicated correlation coefficients are significant at the significance level (0.01). Thus the questionnaire's items are considered reliable and valid for what they were initially designed to measure.

Table 2
Items Correlation Coefficients Values

Questionnaire's Dimensions									
Participants' Perceptions of Quality Features		Online Features and Delivery Quality				Online Participation and Duration		Transformational Learning for Instructional Practices	
Item No.	Correlation Coefficient	Item No.	Correlation Coefficient	Item No.	Correlation Coefficient	Item No.	Correlation Coefficient	Item No.	Correlation Coefficient
1	.722**	1	.463**	5	.454**	1	.682**	1	.786**
2	.769**	2	.543**	6	.500**	2	.719**	2	.857**
3	.764**	3	.634**	7	.438**	3	.798**	3	.842**
4	.627**	4	.436**	8	.598**	4	.820**	4	.820**
						5	.769**		

Results

The “Statistical Package for Social Sciences” (SPSS) was used to highlight the difference between the research sample's mean scores and the questionnaire's dimensions. The five-point Likert scale was employed as follows: five points to (strongly agree), four points to (agree), three points to (neutral), two points to (disagree), and one point to (strongly disagree). The arithmetic averages were calculated using the following formula: (the highest point value – the lowest value) / 3 = (5 - 1) / 3 = 1.33. As a result, the categories are as follows: 1-2.33 is low, 2.34-3.67 is moderate, and 3.68-5 is high.

Participants' Perception of the Effectiveness of OPDPs

Table 3 shows that the participants' perceptions of the effectiveness of the OPDPs were high, with an overall average reaching 3.68 and a standard deviation of 0.49. This shows the homogeneity of the study sample members in evaluating the effectiveness of OPDPs presented during the pandemic of Covid-19. The effectiveness of the four dimensions was reasonably high, except for the dimension of 'Online Features and Delivery Quality,' which received a moderate level of effectiveness with a mean of 3.41 and a standard deviation of 0.51.

Table 3
Arithmetic Means and Standard Deviations of the Questionnaire Dimensions Ranked Descendingly

	Dimensions	Mean	Std. Deviation(SD)	Effectiveness
1	Transformational Learning for Instructional Practices	3.99	0.71	High
2	Perceptions of OPDPs Quality Features	3.88	0.64	High
3	Online Participation and Duration	3.71	0.72	High
4	Online Features and Delivery Quality	3.41	0.51	Moderate
	Total	3.68	0.49	High

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Transformational Learning for Instructional Practices

Table 4 depicts that all items in the dimension of 'Transformational Learning for Instructional Practices' came with a high degree of effectiveness. The item, "As I worked through the Online Professional Development Programs, I used technology skills that were new for me," ranked first with an average of 4.02. In contrast, the item, "I learned a great deal of practical information for my teaching due to the Online Professional Development Programs," ranked last with an average of 3.96.

Table 4

Arithmetic Means and Standard Deviations of Transformational Learning for Instructional Practices Ranked Descendingly

Item No	Item Statements	Mean	SD	Effectiveness	Ranked
4	As I worked through the OPDPs, I used technology skills that were new for me	4.02	0.88	High	1
1	I have set goals for myself regarding the implementation of OPDPs	4.00	0.84	High	2
2	The content in the OPDPs is easily adaptable to my classroom instruction	3.97	0.86	High	3
3	I learned a great deal of practical information for my teaching as a result of the OPDPs	3.96	0.87	High	4
Total		3.99	0.71	High	

Participants' Perceptions of OPDPs Quality Features

Table 5 illustrates 'Participants' Perceptions of OPDPs Quality Features,' which were highly rated with a mean of 3.88. While three items were found to have a high degree of effectiveness of 75%, the least ranked item was found to have a moderate degree of effectiveness. The item, "The OPDPs show or describe application activities that I can readily implement in my classroom," ranked first with an average of 4.06. In contrast, the item, "The Online Professional Development Programs provided good theory, but I am not sure how they apply to my work," ranked last with an average of 3.45.

Table 5

Arithmetic Means and Standard Deviations of the Participants' Perceptions of OPDPs Quality Features Ranked Descendingly

Item No	Item Statements	Mean	SD	Effectiveness	Ranked
1	The OPDPs show or describe application activities that I can readily implement in my classroom	4.06	0.83	High	1
2	The OPDPs provided me information I will use in the future	4.02	0.80	High	2
3	The OPDPs have answered some professional questions or concerns I have	3.97	0.84	High	3
4	The OPDPs provided good theory, but I am not sure how they apply to my work	3.45	1.14	Moderate	4
Total		3.88	0.64	High	

Online Participation and Duration

Table 6 shows that the dimension of 'Online Participation and Duration' has a high level of effectiveness, with a mean average of 3.71. Three items exhibited a high degree of effectiveness, comprising 60% of the total. Two items were given a moderate degree of effectiveness, including the remaining 40%. While the item, "I viewed the OPDPs by myself from home," ranked first with a mean of 3.92, "I viewed the OPDPs with one or two colleagues" placed last with a mean of 3.52.

Table 6

Arithmetic Means and Standard Deviations of Online Participation and Duration Ranked Descendingly

Item No	Item Statements	Mean	SD	Effectiveness	Ranked
2	I viewed the OPDPs by myself from home	3.92	0.85	High	1
1	I spent 4 hours or less viewing OPDPs	3.88	0.88	High	2
3	I viewed the OPDPs by myself at school	3.71	0.93	High	3
5	I viewed the OPDPs as part of a whole group	3.54	1.06	Moderate	4
4	I viewed the OPDPs along with one or two colleagues	3.52	1.03	Moderate	5
Total		3.71	0.72	High	

Online Features and Delivery Quality

While EFL teachers appreciated OPDP scheduling flexibility, navigation, features, and format, they rated OPDPs lower in duration, content, motivation, and whether they are dull or exciting. Table 7 illustrates 'Online Features and Delivery Quality,' which was moderately effective, averaging 3.41. Four items with a high degree of effectiveness represented 50% of the total. The other 50% was represented by the remaining four items with moderate effectiveness. The item, "The online learning fits my schedule better than meeting face to face," ranked first with a mean of 3.82, whereas the item, "The OPDPs are boring," ranked last with a mean of 2.69.

Table 7

Arithmetic Means and Standard Deviations of Online Features and Delivery Quality Ranked Descendingly

Item No.	Item Statements	Mean	SD	Effectiveness	Ranked
1	The online learning fits my schedule better than meeting face to face	3.82	0.93	High	1
7	Navigating the OPDPs was a clear and simple process	3.78	0.83	High	2
6	The OPDPs have a good balance in their text, video, and interactive tasks	3.73	0.85	High	3
2	The online format offers content delivery advantages over face-to-face delivery	3.69	0.92	High	4
3	The online part of the training was more work than I expected	3.49	1.02	Moderate	5
8	As I worked through the OPDPs, I felt as though I was on information	3.26	1.09	Moderate	6
5	It was difficult to stay motivated as I worked through the OPDPs	2.77	1.14	Moderate	7
4	The OPDPs are boring	2.69	1.21	Moderate	8
Total		3.41	0.51	Moderate	

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Table 8 below presents the ANOVA analysis of the demographic data. The table shows no statistically significant differences due to the variables of gender, age, experience, or qualifications. However, there are statistically significant differences due to the attendance variable of these professional programs between those who have attended during the pandemic and who have not in favour of the formers where the calculated F values reached 13.058, which is statistically significant at the level of significance ($\alpha \leq 0.05$).

Table 8
The ANOVA Analysis of the Demographic Data

Source	Type III Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Gender	.013	1	.013	.062	.804
Age	.510	5	.102	.491	.783
Experience	.252	3	.084	.404	.750
Qualification	.197	2	.098	.473	.623
Programs attendance	2.713	1	2.713	13.058	.000*
Error	81.870	394	.208		
Total	7110.642	516			
Corrected Total	124.684	515			

*Statistically significant

Discussion

The main objective of this study was to explore EFL teachers' perceptions of the effectiveness of OPDPs in Saudi Arabia concerning four dimensions: 1) transformational learning for instructional practices; 2) perceptions of OPDP quality features; 3) online participation and duration; and 4) online features and delivery quality. This section provides a detailed discussion of the study's findings concerning the research questions stated in the introduction.

Regarding the first research question, the results found that EFL teachers' perceptions of the effectiveness of OPDPs in Saudi Arabia were relatively high. As shown in Table 3, the dimensions "Transformational Learning for Instructional Practices," "Perceptions of OPDPs' Quality Features," and "Online Participation and Duration" were highly effective. In contrast, the fourth dimension, "Online Features and Delivery Quality," was only moderately effective. This means that EFL teachers in Saudi Arabia had a generally positive attitude towards attending OPDPs during the COVID-19 pandemic. These findings are consistent with previous research on teachers' perceptions of OPDPs in terms of positive effectiveness (Alzahrani & Althaqafi, 2020; Dana et al., 2021; Parsons et al., 2019). An overview of how the attained results for each dimension correspond to existing research follows.

The participants' perceptions of transformational learning for instructional practices were high. Most participants believed that OPDPs demonstrated or highlighted activities they could quickly implement in their classrooms and addressed some of their professional questions or concerns (Alghamdi, 2018; DeAngelis et al., 2013). This contradicts Lewis's (2002) claims that just 10% of what teachers learn at typical PD sessions is ever incorporated into the classroom. It also contrasts Collins and Liang's (2015) observation that participants felt the content of the OPDPs was not easily transferable to their employment.

The participants' perceptions of online features and delivery quality were moderate. The study's findings suggested that OPDPs function was better for participants' schedules than face-to-face encounters, inconsistent with Fishman et al., (2013). Although most survey respondents thought the content of these programs was interesting, a considerable percentage said the OPDPs were boring and had more work than they expected, which might be due to a lack of direct contact or because the environment surrounding them prevents them from completely concentrating on fulfilling OPDP requirements. Furthermore, while most participants felt that the OPDPs delivered a strong theory, they were unclear about how to apply it to their job, which might be attributed to a lack of practical exercise (Lewis, 2002).

In addition, the study findings indicated that the quality features of OPDPs, such as texts, videos, and interactive tasks, may have played essential roles in teachers' perceptions of OPDPs because a high percentage of instructors believe that OPDPs contain an adequate balance of text, video, and interactive tasks (Al-Bargi, 2021; Russell et al., 2009). A high percentage of participants also indicated satisfaction with the efficacy of the techniques and media employed in delivering the programs and program duration. Moreover, most participants spent 4 hours or fewer viewing OPDPs because of the online format's material delivery benefits over face-to-face delivery and because EFL teachers are relatively eager to attend these programs. Finally, most participants viewed OPDPs from home supports our hypothesis that OPDPs overcome time and location obstacles, as Elliott (2017) indicated.

Furthermore, most participants were in the 31-40 year age group, with sufficient instruction, training, and technological experience, in line with other research which highlighted that experienced EFL instructors favour utilising technology more than beginner teachers and are more supportive of the benefits of technology in language instruction (Rosa, 2016). They are also aware of the importance of OPDPs for their career compared to young teachers. Educational level may also significantly influence the desire for PD since most participants had master's and doctoral degrees.

Although the findings of this study showed high effectiveness of OPDPs among EFL teachers during the pandemic, low and moderate efficacy of such programs were found in studies conducted a couple of years before the pandemic (Alghamdi, 2018; Alghamdi & Li 2011; Alzahrani and Althaqafi, 2020). This variance in the effectiveness of such programs might be due to the sudden shift to eLearning because of the pandemic, which helped reshape teachers' perceptions of OPDPs.

The study's findings discovered statistically significant differences in the efficiency of OPDPs between EFL teachers who attended OPDPs and those who did not in favour of the former. The EFL teachers who attended OPDPs felt they were valuable and highly effective, as evidenced by their replies to the four previously indicated dimensions. These results can be attributed to EFL teachers' ability to interact remotely with other EFL teachers outside their local region, thus enhancing their teaching skills and expanding their knowledge through experience sharing. Moreover, this may result from high effectiveness technology-based delivery methods, enabling cross-district collaboration regardless of location. OPDPs can also be an excellent source for obtaining up-to-date teaching skills, particularly during exceptional circumstances like the COVID-

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19 pandemic. It has also been noted that OPDPs facilitate teachers in incorporating technology into their work because it requires a degree of diverse technological awareness and skill (Berndt et al., 2017; Erickson et al., 2012; Joshua, 2017; Parsons et al., 2019). However, this observation contrasts with previous findings that teachers preferred future face-to-face PDPs rather than online (Russell et al., 2009).

However, no statistically significant differences were found among the remaining variables of the study, namely gender, age, experience, qualifications and EFL teachers' perceptions of the effectiveness of OPDPs. Although this result is in line with Mahdi and Aldera's study (2013), where no significant differences in teachers' perceptions were found due to such mentioned variables, some contradictory results were found (Hürsen, 2012; Tweed, 2013).

The study's findings revealed that most study participants chose OPDPs over other traditional methods since organisations worldwide are moving to digital solutions in response to COVID-19 (Ahadi et al., 2021). The research also confirms the results of previous studies that a significant number of teachers are aware of the importance and effectiveness of OPDPs. However, this study adds to earlier studies because many participants responded that they did not attend any OPDPs. So, as this and other studies suggest, there is a need to motivate teachers to attend OPDPs to cope with changing teaching and learning environments and be efficient teachers. Doing so would increase teachers' readiness to participate in OPDPs.

Limitations and Recommendations

Even though teachers had conflicting feelings regarding OPDPs, their expertise and viewpoints gave unique insights into the four characteristics that contribute directly and practically to OPDPs framework research. However, there were some limitations to this study. The first limitation was in the applicability of its results to non-EFL teachers. Being based on EFL teachers alone, the acquired perspectives cannot be reliably transferred to teachers of different subjects, schools, regions, or beyond. The second limitation was the adoption of the quantitative approach. As such, these results could be strengthened by conducting future qualitative research and interviews. The third limitation is that the sample size was insufficient to generalise findings. Future research could potentially evaluate larger samples from other specialities to provide more comprehensive results.

Conclusion

This study aimed to evaluate the preferences and views of EFL teachers in Saudi Arabia concerning OPDP effectiveness. The results showed that those undertaking OPDPs found them beneficial and appreciated the online learning format. Participants recognised the benefits of OPDPs in enhancing and improving their teaching skills. Furthermore, the results highlighted that EFL teachers had a positive perception of OPDP effectiveness during the COVID-19 period. While the data revealed a significant difference in participants' perceptions of OPDPs based on OPDP attendance, there were no significant differences based on demographic characteristics such as gender, age, experience, or qualifications. These results imply that prioritising OPDPs for EFL instructors in Saudi Arabia may create enhanced proficiency and the capacity to overcome obstacles, particularly in extraordinary situations like the COVID-19 outbreak.

This study also identified literature gaps in OPDP research and potential avenues for future research directions.

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