Moroccan EFL Teachers' Participation, Preferences, and Perceived Effectiveness of Online Professional Development

Oussama MOUSSAOUI
Sidi Mohammed Ben Abdellah University, Fes, Morocco
oussama.moussaoui2@usmba.ac.ma

Abstract
The present study aims at investigating Moroccan EFL teachers' participation in and attitude towards online professional development. It seeks also to examine teachers' perceived effectiveness of online professional development by using a cross-sectional survey design. This design was supported with a questionnaire and a scale to collect data from a sample of (103) Moroccan EFL teacher. The data elicited was coded and analyzed quantitatively and qualitatively. The results of the study reveal that teachers in the Moroccan context are not fully engaged in online professional and they still exhibit higher preference to traditional forms of professional development. In addition, the results report that teachers perceive that online professional development provides effective content that is sustainable and access flexible. However, teachers also inform that online professional development is not active and collaborative in nature. Based on the results of this study a number of informed recommendations are directed to Moroccan English language teachers and policymakers.

1. INTRODUCTION

Professional development is of critical importance in any profession. Professional development opportunities make it possible for practitioners to hone their skills and keep up with the newest trends and updates in their profession. English language teaching is one of these professions that requires ongoing professional development to help teachers meet the constantly changing needs of learners. The critical importance of teachers' professional development stems from the fact that professional development programs enhance teachers' knowledge on different issues of teaching and learning and improve their everyday classroom practice and activities (Birman, Desimone, Porter, & Garet, 2000; Cobb, 2000). Similarly, the great importance of teachers' professional development is supported by many studies that report that teachers' professional development correlates positively with students' better achievement in different skills (Cohen & Hill, 2001; Desimone et al., 2002; Sanders & Rivers, 1996; Supovitz, 2001; Tatto, 1997). Teachers' professional development has been traditionally provided in 'brick and morter' manner that restrict teachers with boundaries of time and place as they had to be present in face-to-face conferences, workshops, lectures, training sessions, and other forms of on-site professional development (Elmore, 2002). This form of traditional professional development has been criticized as being costly and ineffective in "providing teachers with sufficient time, activities, and content necessary for increasing teachers' knowledge and fostering meaningful changes" (Garet et al., 2001, p. 920). Hence, for effective professional development, teachers need to be offered enough time to discuss and reflect regularly and interactively on issues concerned mainly with teaching/learning practices

(Desimone, Porter, Garet, Yoon, & Birman, 2002). This form of continuous, interactive, and job-related professional development is now made available with the proliferation of web tools, social networks, and online communities that provide innovative ways for delivering prolonged, active, and 'job-embedded' online professional development (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Lock, 2006; Wenger, 1988). Having said that, the current study seeks to explore the extent to which teachers in the Moroccan context participate in online professional development. It seeks also to find out about and their perceived effectiveness of this form of professional development tools and platforms. Based on these two objectives, this study addresses three research questions:

1/ To what extent EFL teachers are engaged in online professional development activities?
2/ Do EFL teachers prefer in person and/or online professional development activities?
3/ To what extent EFL teachers perceive that online professional development is effective?

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK
2.1.Teachers' Professional Development

Professional development, in general sense, is the development a person seeks to ameliorate his/her skills in a certain profession (Villegas-Reimers, 2003). In somewhat a similar definition in the Macmillan Online Dictionary (2013), professional development ~~is~~ refers to ~~as~~ "the process of obtaining the skills, qualifications and experience that allows you to make progress in your career". From the definitions provided so far, it can be noted that professional development is simply the learning of new skills that facilitate and enhance professional performance. Within the scope of education, the concept of professional development has been thoroughly defined. For instance, Hassel (1999) note that professional development is "the process of improving staff skills and competencies needed to produce outstanding educational results for students" (p. 1). In another definition, Glatthorn (1995) claims that teachers' professional development "is the professional growth a teacher achieves as a result of gaining increased experience and examining his or her teaching systematically" (p. 41). Guskey and Kwang Suk (2009) also agreed with other scholars (Glatthorn, 1995; Villegas-Reimers, 2003) in viewing teachers' professional development as an endeavor to refine teachers' skills, attitudes, beliefs, and teaching practices with the aim of improving students' learning. Stated clearly, teachers' professional development describes all the activities and experiences in which teachers engage in to develop professionally and find better ways to cater for learners' needs and enhance their knowledge. Teachers' professional development takes different forms. It can include formal experiences (participating in workshops and conferences, taking new courses, engaging in programs for staff development, and doing research) or informal experiences (reading materials related to one's profession, watching videos on one's field of practice, and discussing professional issue with colleagues) (Ganser, 2000; Knapp, 2003).

2.2.Models of Professional Development

Discussing the models of professional development brings to the fore the umbrella terms of form and reform professional development. Form professional development stands for the traditional forms of professional development that include face-to-face activities like conferences, workshops, seminars, and in-service training (Garet et al., 2001). This form of professional development has been strongly criticized for a number of reasons. First, it is regarded as an intermittent form of professional development that provides teachers with no follow up. On this concern, Guskey (2002) notes that most of traditional professional development programs are 'one-shot phenomena' providing teachers few opportunities to learn up-to-date teaching practices. The form professional development also considers the teacher as a passive receiver of experts' knowledge leaving no chance for knowledge to be collaboratively and actively constructed (Atay, 2008; Guskey, 2000). Similarly, teachers have intensely

complained about the traditional form of professional development as being irrelevant to their needs and interests and therefore not impacting their teaching practices (Little, 1993; Porter et al., 2000). In this context, Jesness (2000) points "anyone who thinks education can be substantially improved with workshops probably hasn't ever attended one" (p. 37). As a matter of fact, there has been an urgent call for reforms in professional development in such a way as to make it more collaborative in nature and takes the teacher as an active recipient of knowledge who discusses, reflects, and constructs professional knowledge (Garet et al., 2001; Guskey, 2009). The reform professional development is related to issues of teaching and learning that serve classroom practices and enhance learning (Desimone et al., 2002; Elmore, 2002). In like manner, it is prolonged in time providing teachers with a series of related training with continuous follow-up that have proved more effective when compared to the sporadic professional development programs. (Garet et al., 2001; Guskey, 2009). This reform in professional development has gained popularity worldwide with the proliferation of online technologies.

2.3. Online Professional Development

Online professional development is part of the reform professional development. This kind of development is defined as "delivery of professional development where participants and instructors are separated by time and usually distance using the World Wide Web for instruction, communication and collaboration" (Rasmussen & Northrup, 2002, p. 2). Kleinman (2004) agrees with this definition denoting that online professional development is the use of internet to share knowledge, activities, and expertise in a collaborative and interactive manner with members of the same interest for the sake of enhancing one's professional practice and knowledge. Online professional development has gained popularity with the proliferation of web 2.0 tools. The Web 2.0 tools including Facebook, Blogs, Wikis, Twitter, YouTube, and others have offered educators new ways for learning and professional development (Crook et al., 2008; El Hadef, 2021; Laurillard, 2002). On this concern, it has been claimed in the National Technology Plan of the US Department of Education (2010) that "social networks can be used to provide educators with career-long personal learning tools and resources that make professional learning timely and relevant as well as ongoing activity that continually improves practice and evolves their skills over time" (p.49). The use of social networks for professional development has given birth to online communities of practice. These communities are groups of professionals with the same interest and concern who use ICTs for communication, interaction and knowledge construction (Dubé et al, 2005). The online communities of practice concerned with education and other disciplines have witnessed an immense proliferation in the digital era as they make access to knowledge and interaction with expert all over the world unrestricted with boundaries of time and place (Crook et al., 2008; Dubé et al., 2005).

2.4. Features of Effective Professional Development

Scholars and experts in professional development have agreed upon three characteristics of effective teachers' professional development (Archibald et al., 2011; Borko, 2004; Desimone et al., 2002; Garet et al., 2001; Guskey & Huberman, 1995). These characteristics include sustained time, collaborative and active participation, and situated activities.
Time sustainability is a crucial element for effective professional development in general and for teachers' professional development in particular. This is so, as teaching is considered a difficult task and "substantial time will be required for teachers and other educators to test out new ideas, assess their effects, adjust their strategies and approaches… to make learning more meaningful" (Darling-Hammond et al., 2002, p. 29). However, research has revealed that teachers are not substantially involved in professional development programs (Borko, 2004;

Darling-Hammond, 2006; Garet et al., 2001) since "most professional development opportunities are much shorter" (Darling-Hammond et al., 2009, p. 7). Hence, sustainable professional development activities that provide extended time for teachers to learn new ideas and experiment them in their classroom are essential to impact teachers' classroom practice (Joyce & Showers, 2002; Destimone et al., 2001).

Effective professional development needs also to be active and collaborative in nature. According to Hill et al. (2010) "teachers develop expertise not as isolated individuals but through job-embedded professional development, as members of collaborative, interdisciplinary teams" (p.10). In simple words, efficient professional development is the one that engages teachers as a group of professional to interact, inquire, share knowledge, and reflect actively and collaboratively on issue of teaching/learning practices (National Staff Development Council, 2001).

Situated activity is another characteristic of effective professional development. The traditional forms of professional development that discuss issue unrelated to teaching practices and teachers' needs often results in teachers' disappointment and reluctance to take part in those irrelevant professional development initiatives (Borko, 2004; Guskey, 2009; Darling-Hammond et al., 2009). Therefore, professional development programs need to be "situated in schools that is always about the current work of schools" (Archibald et al., 2011, p.5). In other words, effective professional development must be grounded in teachers' daily practices and related to issue of teachers' pedagogical and content knowledge that serve their teaching practices, and improve students' learning and achievement (Darling-Hammond & McLauglin, 1995; Hirsch, 2005). The great importance of situated professional development is also proved by many empirical studies that revealed that professional development programs that are related to teachers' needs and classroom practices have positive impact on teachers' practices and students' achievement (Guskey, 2009; Garet et al., 2001; Zepeda, 2008).

3. METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK
3.1. Research Design of the Study

The current study adapts a cross-sectional survey design. This design is used to examine peoples' attitudes, beliefs, and practices at one moment of time (Creswell, 2012; Fraenkel, Wallen & Hyun, 2012). Hence, the cross-sectional survey design is an appropriate choice for this study that aims to examine EFL teachers' attitudes and preferences towards online professional development.

3.2. Sampling Method

The target population of the current study is Moroccan EFL teachers. Therefore, the appropriate sampling measure used is purposive sampling that "is used in order to access 'knowledgeable people', i.e. those who have in-depth knowledge about particular issues, maybe by virtue of their professional role, power, access to networks, expertise or experience" (Ball, 1990 cited in Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2007, p.115). Based on this sampling method, (103) EFL teachers from different institutions and cities in Morocco accepted to participated in this study. These participant are categorized into (44) high school teachers and (59) university professors as shown in figure (1).
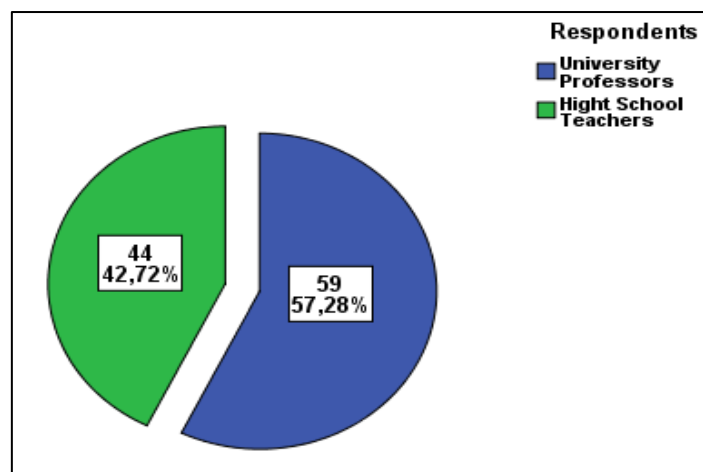
Figure 1. Sample of the Study

3.3.Instruments of the Study

This study utilizes a questionnaire and a 5-point Likert scale to collect data. The questionnaire is organized into three sections: the first section deals with questions that are intended to tap into the respondents' background information that include age, gender, teaching experience, and the institutions to which they belong. The second section that is composed of (5) questions tries to collect data on teachers' participation in online professional development activities. The third section that consists of (2) questions examines teachers' preferences of online professional development. The 5-point Likert scale used in this study to measure the perceived effectiveness of online professional development activities is composed of (13) items. The first four items aim at measuring the effectiveness of the content of online professional development activities. The second four items assess the duration and the follow-up of online professional development activities. The last five items on the scale evaluate if online professional development activities provide teachers with active and collaborative learning experiences. In regards to the scale's reliability, Cronbach's alpha test was utilized to check the consistency of the respondents' scores on the items of the scale. The Cronbach's alpha test revealed quite reliable results as the alpha's coefficient reached a value of (0.76).

3.4.Data Collection and Analysis Procedures

To collect data for this study, teachers were contacted face-to-face in the institutions where they teach, and via emails to fill in the questionnaire and the effectiveness scale. After collecting data from teachers, the statistical package of social sciences (SPSS 20) was used to code and analyze quantitative data, while the qualitative data elicited from the open-ended questions on the questionnaire was analyzed as a backup to account for the quantitative data.

4. RESULTS

The present study aims at answering three research questions. The first question is concerned with discovering EFL teachers' participation in online professional development. The second question intends to study EFL teachers' preferences of online and/or in person professional development. The third question seeks to examine EFL teachers' perceived effectiveness of online professional development. The results of these questions are presented and analyzed in this section.

4.1.Teachers' Participation in Online Professional Development Activities

To describe teachers' participation in online professional development activities, descriptive statistics are used with the help of a bar's chart as displayed in figure (2).
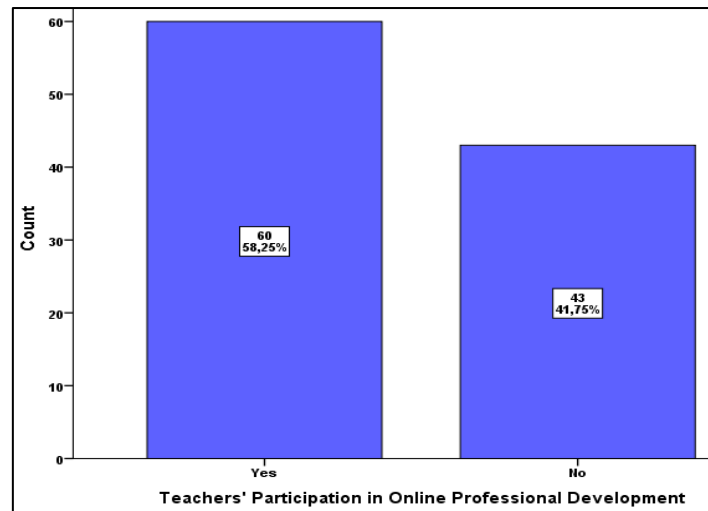
Figure 2. Teachers' Participation in Online Professional Development Activities

The results in figure (2) show that (58.25%) of the respondents participate in online professional activities which is not an extremely higher frequency than teachers' who have never participated in online professional development activities (41.75%). For further details on teachers' participation in online professional development activities, teachers' were inquired to describe meticulously their participation in online professional development and the tools they use for this purpose. The results of this further investigation are demonstrated in figure (3).
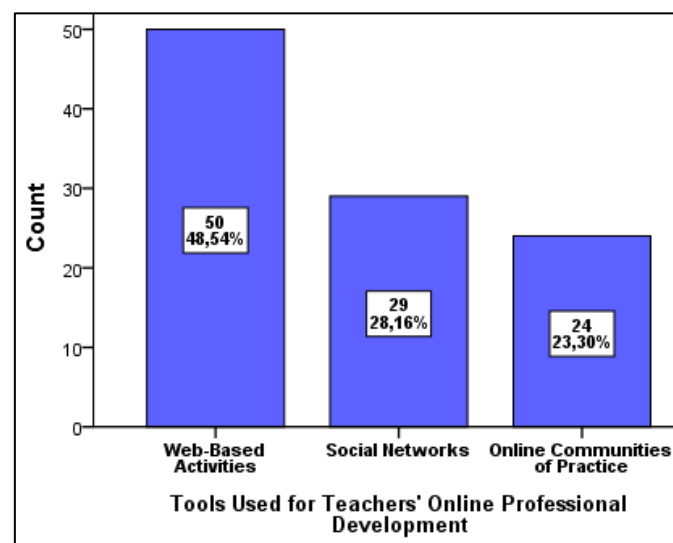

Figure 3. Tools Used for Teachers' Online Professional Development

Figure (3) reveal that teachers' use different tools to access online professional development. These tools include web-based activities that take higher frequency of use (48,54%) followed by social networks (28,16%), then online communities of practice (23,3%). These results are supported by qualitative data that provides examples of web-based activities, social networks, and online communities' teachers use for professional development. In regard to web-based activities, the participants in this study noted using a number of websites for professional development including Edutopia, Teach Thought, JPL, Book Widget Blog, Educators Technology, Future Learn, TESOL Blog and websites' publications of universities. For social networks, teachers declared using Facebook, YouTube, Microsoft Teams, Edmodo and

Pinterest. Participants in the current study also revealed participating in online communities of practice like Classroom 2.0, EdWeb.net, iTeach, and Zoom communities.

4.2. Teachers' Preferences of Online Professional Development Activities

This study is also concerned with teachers' preferences towards online and face-to-face professional development activities. The results of teachers' preference are shown in figure (4).
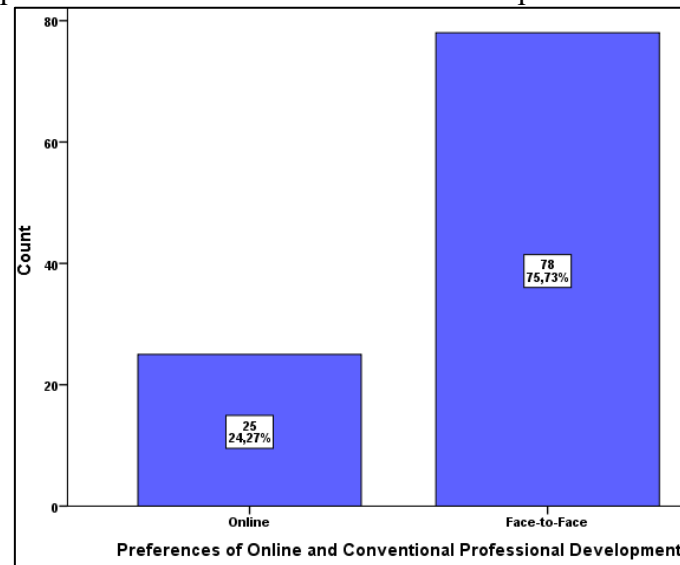

Figure 4. Teachers' Preferences of Online and Conventional Professional Development

The results of the second research question indicate that teachers are more favorable of face-to-face professional development activities (75,73%) than online ones which take only (24,27%) of use among teachers who participated in this study. Teachers were as well asked about the reasons behind their preference of the one modes of professional development over the other (online and face-to-face) to enrich the findings of this study. The findings of this further investigation reveal that teachers' preference of face-to-face professional development activities is due to lack of human contact, interaction, engagement, and immediate feedback in the online forms of professional development. Besides, the limited technological knowledge of some participants was also cited as another reason why they tend to feel more comfortable in face-to-face professional development opportunities. However, teachers who preferred online professional development stated that this mode of professional development is flexible in time and place and offers more opportunities for learning and reaching out to a broader range of audiences and trainers all over the world.

4.3. Teachers' Perceived Effectiveness of Online Professional Development Activities

Teachers' perceived effectiveness of online professional development activities is measured using a five-point Likert scale. The results of this measurement are presented in the descriptive table (1).

Table (1)

Descriptive Statistics of Teachers' Perceived Effectiveness of Online Professional Activities
Descriptive Statistics

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation

Item 1: The content of online professional development activities is useful	103	4,2427	1,07070
Item 2: Online professional development activities are related to my field of interest	103	4,1165	,49112
Item 3: Online professional development activities meet my professional needs	103	4,1262	1,03545
Item 4: Online professional development activities are related to issues of teachers' pedagogical and content knowledge	103	3,9903	1,07096
Item 5: Online professional development activities provide enough time for learning	103	4,2136	,76248
Item 6: Online professional development activities are prolonged over time	103	3,5049	,73929
Item 7: Online professional development activities are accessible any time	103	3,9806	,95979
Item 8: Online professional development activities provide follow up activities	103	2,9029	,91303
Item 9: Online professional development activities engage me actively in the learning process	103	2,5049	1,10146
Item 10: Online professional development activities allow for interaction with experts in my fields of interest	103	2,4369	1,09964
Item 11: Online professional development activities allow for interaction with colleagues of the same professional interests	103	2,2039	1,04186
Item 12: Online professional development activities allow for discussion of professional issues with experts	103	2,3592	,97874
Item 13: Online professional development activities allow for discussion of professional issues with colleagues of the same interests	103	2,3592	,97874
Valid N (listwise)	103		

The descriptive statistics in table (1) revealed that teachers' perceive that the content of online professional development activities is situated in their teaching practices and related to their fields of interest as indicated by the mean values of the first four items in the table. The mean value of (4.24) for the first item indicate that teachers tend to believe that the content of online professional activities is rather useful. The mean value of (4.11) for the second item also informs that online professional development activities are related to teachers' fields of interest. The same applies to the third item in which teachers strongly believe that online activities cater for their professional needs as confirmed by the mean value of (4.12). Similarly, the mean value of the 4th item (3.99) support the findings of the previous items informing that online professional development activities are related to issues of teachers' pedagogical and content knowledge. The results in table (1) also disclose that online professional development activities provide time sustainability for professional development, which is another characteristic of effective professional development. Time sustainability of online professional development is proved by the mean values of items (5), (6), (7) and (8). The 5th item indicates that online professional development activities provide teachers enough time for learning since the mean value goes up to (4.21). The mean value (3.50) of the 6th item informs that teachers perceive that online professional development activities are prolonged over time. Item (7) reports that online professional development activities are accessible any time as demonstrated by the mean value of (3.98). In the same way, teachers in this study perceive that online professional development provide follow up activities as confirmed by the mean value (2.90) of item (8). Another characteristic of effective professional development is active and collaborative participation in professional development activities. The results of this characteristic indicate that the online professional development activities do not allow for enough active and

collaborative engagement in professional development activities as affirmed by the mean values of the remaining items on the table that are less than the average value of (2.50).

5. DISCUSSION OF THE FINDINGS
5.1. Teachers' Participation in Online Professional Development Activities

The findings of this study indicate that (58.25%) of teachers participated in some kind of online professional development. This participation was in the form of using different tools of online professional development such as web-based activities, social networks, and online communities of practice. These findings are supported by previous studies in which teachers reported participating in online professional development using social networks, webinars, and online communities for professional development (Alzahrani & Althaqafi, 2020; Poole et al., 2020). However, the rate of teachers' participation in online professional development activities in this study (58.25%) is not significantly higher than those who did not participate (41.15%). This would imply that online professional development is still in its infancy stage in the Moroccan context as teachers are still reluctant to fully engage in this new form of professional development.

5.2. Teachers' Preferences of Online Professional Development Activities

The statistical results of the current study seem to reveal that teachers tend to show higher preference for traditional forms of professional development (75.73%) than for the online forms (24.27%). These findings are in sharp contrast to a number of studies in which teachers preferred online professional development due to its flexibility and sustainability (Poole et al., 2020; Reeves & Pedulla, 2011). However, in the Moroccan context there are many reasons behind the disfavor of face-to-face forms of professional development as reported by teachers who participated in this study. These reasons are mainly the lack of human contact, interaction, engagement, and immediate feedback. Therefore, if the designers of online professional development activities find ways to keep on the human contact and offer various ways of interaction and immediate feedback, Moroccan teachers would prefer the online form of professional development due to its flexibility, sustainability, and efficacy.

5.3. Teachers' Perceived Effectiveness of Online Professional Development Activities

Teachers' perceived effectiveness of online professional development activities in this study disclosed that the content of online professional development is effective since it relates to teachers' fields of interest and caters for their professional needs. In addition, teachers' reported that the efficacy of online professional development is due to its time and space flexibility. This effectiveness is confirmed by the results of many studies in different contexts (Alzahrani & Althaqafi, 2020; Hussein, 2013; Poole et al., 2020). In the present study teachers also perceived that online professional development activities are not effective in fostering active and collaborative participation in professional development which contradicts the results of other studies in which teachers' reported the efficacy of online professional development in promoting active and collaborative participation in professional development (Alzahrani & Althaqafi, 2020; Poole et al., 2020). These contradictory results in the Moroccan context could be attributed to teachers' preference of traditional forms of professional development that keeps the face-to-face contact and interaction, and also to the fact that teachers' in this study participated only in informal forms of online professional development that don't meet all the characteristics of effective professional development.

6. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The results of current study reveal that teachers in the Moroccan context who participated in this study are not fully engaged in online professional development as this is form of professional development is not prevailing in such a context. Teachers also reported that online forms of professional development is not their preferred modality as it lacks the human contact, interaction, immediate feedback, and requires technological knowledge. Despite the fact that teachers are reluctant to engage in online professional development, they noted that this type of professional development provides beneficial content that meet their professional needs and informed knowledge about new practices in teaching and learning. Besides, the study revealed that online professional development activities are prolonged in time and provide follow up activities. However, teachers disclosed the inefficacy of online professional development in establishing active and collaborative learning environment.

Based on the findings of this study, it is recommended that further research needs to be conducted in the Moroccan context to enrich teachers' awareness of the great potentials and efficiency of online professional development. This is likely going to encourage them to take part in online forms of professional development. Trainings on the use of technological devices and online platforms for professional development is also needed in the Moroccan context. Similarly, designers of online professional development activities need to consider providing active and collaborative activities that provide immediate feedback and interaction as teachers declared that these elements are missing in the online forms of professional development they participated in. In like manner, policymakers need to think of designing and providing formal online professional development programs that integrate the effective characteristics of professional development.

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About the Author

Oussama Moussaoui *is a researcher who holds an M.A in applied linguistics and language teaching. Currently, the researcher is a senior Ph.D. candidate undertaking research in ELT methodologies and the integration of innovative technologies in language teaching/learning. The researcher has published a number of scholarly articles related to educational research and worked in different institutions of higher education as an adjunct professor.*