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College English Language Teaching Reform and Key Factors Determining EFL Teachers' Professional Development

Sun Zhiyong*

Nanyang Normal University, CHINA

Priyadarshini Muthukrishnan

HELP University, MALAYSIA

Gurnam Kaur Sidhu

SEGi University, MALAYSIA

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Abstract: Owing to the rapid expansion and development of newly upgraded undergraduate colleges and universities in China, the Ministry of Education implemented the College English Language Teaching Reform (CELTR) to improve College English language teaching and learning at higher institutions. This reform aims to improve the quality of teaching and learning of English as a Foreign Language (EFL). The present study aims to identify potential factors influencing the EFL teachers' professional development in the context of the College English language curriculum reform in mainland China. In total, 92 EFL college teachers from a newly upgraded university located in Nanyang City, Central China participated in this study, and data were collected using a survey questionnaire. Overall, the findings indicate that the EFL teachers' professional development improved during the implementation process of CELTR and the potential factors that contributed to their professional development were teachers' understanding, self-reflection, and teaching practice.

Keywords: *College English Language Teaching Reform; EFL teachers; teacher professional development; self-reflection; teaching practice.*

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Introduction

The democratisation of education in the late 20th century witnessed the rapid development of higher education institutions all over the world. In China, nearly 53% of the undergraduate colleges and universities were either upgraded or newly constructed over the past two decades. In fact, there were only 573 colleges and universities in 1999 and by the end of 2015, the number of institutions rapidly increased to 1219 (Xie, 2016). Tang (2010) stated that the rapid development resulted in an increase in student enrolments in colleges and universities, especially for the newly constructed or upgraded institutions. Due to the increase in the number of institutions, there was a demand for university teachers, especially English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers. The demand for EFL teachers and various English language courses or programmes requires an overall re-evaluation of the current implementation of College English language programmes in China. Wang (2010) stated that the College English language is viewed as a public and basic course that requires English language teachers' professional knowledge and teaching abilities. With the rapid expansion and development of higher education programs across China, EFL teachers are faced with the challenging task of improving the teaching and learning processes in EFL classrooms.

As a consequence, the National Medium and Long Term Educational Reform and Development Programme were outlined by the Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China (MoEPRC, 2010) to highlight the significant role of EFL teachers as key factors for the success of the Education Project. Quality education cannot be achieved without highly qualified teachers and therefore, EFL teachers must constantly improve their teaching approaches and delivery to meet the new demands of the college students for their continued progress and development. Additionally, the guidelines on college English language teaching were implemented to acknowledge the professional knowledge, qualities, abilities, and levels of EFL teachers as key elements in improving teaching performance (MOEPRC, 2016).

The implementation of the College English Language Teaching Reform (CELTR), together with the requirements and challenges outlined by the reform, offer many opportunities and motivation for teachers. Khan and Begum (2012)

* Corresponding author:

Sun Zhiyong, Department of College English Teaching and Studies, Nanyang Normal University, China. ✉ 1026528882@qq.com

stated that when more opportunities for learning new knowledge and skills are provided, the teachers' teaching skills and professional development will improve accordingly. Therefore, college EFL teachers are encouraged to participate in the Teacher Professional Development (TPD) training programmes and activities to learn and communicate effectively. It is thought that these programmes will further improve their teaching and promote their professional development. However, the education goals and teaching objectives cannot be achieved without the effective implementation of teaching skills and practices by the EFL teachers. Thus, teaching practice is the basic pre-requisite and foundation for the implementation of education and teaching reforms.

It is also important for EFL teachers to acquire the latest teaching knowledge and skills in the context of English language teaching and learning. This is necessary to improve the college students' progress and development and fulfil the international requirements of the global era. On the other hand, the improvement and development of the college EFL teachers' professional qualities, abilities, and levels require policy support from the government and administrative departments as well as the teachers' self-pursuit and hard work. However, the majority of EFL teachers at the newly upgraded colleges or universities face difficulties in carrying out the new reforms to promote their professional development as well as improve and enhance their teaching and learning according to CELTR (Zhiyong et al., 2020). There are various setbacks and discrepancies in the process of English language teaching and the professional development of EFL teachers. This is due to the heavy teaching loads, weak awareness of the teachers' self-development, and family burdens for some of the young teachers (Rui, 2011). Therefore, it is crucial to note the importance and significance of teaching practice, teaching reflection, and awareness as this will enable EFL teachers to recognise their strengths and weaknesses that could facilitate their professional development (Ayyoobi et al., 2016).

Literature Review

The College English Language Teaching Reform (CELTR) in China

In 2016, the MoEPRC implemented the CELTR programme. In the following year, the National Foreign Language Teaching Advisory Board proposed and issued several guidelines to enforce the reform for the improvement of College English language teaching standards and quality and to promote EFL teachers' professional development. College English is viewed as a public and basic course for almost all of the non-English major students in the first two years of their college or university education in China. The main teaching objectives of CELTR are to develop college students' abilities in using English. This includes listening, speaking, reading, writing, and translating to enhance their awareness and competence in intercultural communication, and develop themselves into autonomous language learners who are capable of meeting the personal, national, and social needs for future development (MoEPRC, 2016).

Based on the requirements of CELTR, college EFL teachers are encouraged to shift from the traditional teaching methods and embrace interactive and active teaching and learning strategies. Accordingly, EFL teachers are encouraged to re-evaluate and transform their teaching practices from pure 'teaching' to interactive teaching and 'learning' methods. Wang (2008) stated that both the EFL teachers and college students should use effective teaching and learning methods and approaches to enable students to achieve the learning outcomes. Tyler (2014) highlighted that effective teaching must be centred around the students' participation during classroom teaching. Wang (2016) also stated that various tools, media, and equipment for teaching and learning should be used for teaching. Owing to the rapid development of various Internet technologies, educational technology-based tools and applications have become an indispensable modern teaching aid for English language teaching and learning.

With the implementation of CELTR, English language teachers are able to gradually understand the significance of the proposed changes in the teaching and learning approaches as well as promote their professional development. Nevertheless, no comprehensive study has been performed for CELTR in the context of the EFL teachers' professional development since its implementation in China (Zhiyong et al., 2018). Therefore, the main aim of this study is to investigate how CELTR influences EFL teachers' professional development.

Teacher Professional Development (TPD)

The demand for quality teachers has been increasing and teacher professional development programmes play a crucial role in ensuring teachers have acquired in-depth content knowledge, teaching competencies, attitudes, and 21st century skills. Teacher professional development (TPD) refers to the professional growth of a teacher that is achieved throughout the course of their teaching and self-evaluation of their teaching practices (Avalos, 2011). The core aspect of professional development is improving the teachers' efficiency in a wide range of teaching skills to cater to the learning needs of students. TPD is an integral component of educational institutions that supports educational innovations in teaching and learning practices (Prestridge, 2014). Professional development refers to the activities that help to improve professional career growth. These activities embrace personal development, continuous education, vocational education, and peer collaboration. TPD involves the teachers' participation in developing teaching theories, understanding the essence of teachers' decision-making, self-consciousness, and self-evaluation (Wang, 2016). Professional development is a life-long commitment that is characterised by learning through formal and informal learning opportunities. The Revised Curriculum Standards (Ministry of Education [MoE], 2012) require teachers to

implement substantial changes in their knowledge and expertise as EFL teachers and demonstrate professional competence in their roles as teachers.

The effective learning of College English should not only be a language learning process, but also a process of enriching humanistic knowledge, and improving humanistic accomplishment (Wang, 2016). Therefore, TPD can be summarised as a dynamic developing process of constantly updating and perfecting professional structure and literacy (Hu, 2016). Teachers can improve their professional development by reflecting on their teaching activities, evaluating their teaching, and observing their students' behaviours. According to the Office of Improvement of Quality and Strategy, the components and standards of TPD should be prepared in such a way that teachers are able to understand various demands of the students in educational, emotional, and social areas as well as evaluate the teachers' qualifications in relation to their professional knowledge, skills, attitude dimensions, and many more (Laei, 2012). In China, TPD is a term frequently used in definitions and connotations including teacher training, teacher education, and teacher development (Chen, 2013). Many studies have acknowledged that the transition from teacher training to teacher education and more recently, to teacher development, highlights the different expressions used to indicate various opinions and understandings regarding the concept of TPD. On the other hand, the different expressions reflect the shift in the research focus and to a certain extent, the roles that teachers play in teaching and education (Jiang, 2015). Rui (2011) stated that TPD is a process whereby teachers constantly enrich and update their professional knowledge as well as demonstrate continuous improvement and innovation regarding their professional goals, moralities, emotions, and social responsibilities.

During this process, teachers who have a strong innovative capability will update and expand their teaching ethics as well as learn and develop professional thoughts and practices. It is evident that teachers' teaching mission and reforms cannot be achieved without his or her professional development. Hence, TPD is a historical trend and a pre-requisite for education reforms and development. The main aspects of TPD are to update and enrich teachers' ideologies, promote professional knowledge and levels, study teaching methods, and improve teaching performance. The main approaches recommended are to keep on studying and participating in teaching reforms and research. The aim is to achieve the realisation of individual self-value and team development under the support and encouragement from colleges, universities, and colleagues (MOEPRC, 2016). Therefore, TPD is a continuous development process that aims to improve teachers' beliefs, professional knowledge, skills, emotions, and many more. During this process, teachers can improve their professional connotations and education levels by continuously learning and performing research, giving full attention to their subjects, and realizing their potential value in life.

Relationship between CELTR and EFL Teachers' Professional Development

China's open-door policy and educational reforms have accelerated the demand for the quality of English language teaching and learning at all levels in educational institutions. The English language has always been regarded as the key element and trend-setter towards the modernization and globalization of education. Hence, the English curriculum reform in mainland China was designed with key considerations of multifaceted factors which include social, economic, cultural, and educational background (Wang, 2016). The curriculum reform has placed teachers at the forefront and brought about massive changes and challenges to the role of EFL teachers. The term "Teacher Professional Development (TPD)" was introduced in the Revised Curriculum Standards (MoE, 2012) and since then, TPD has taken a new role (Wang, 2016) that requires teachers to be models of knowledge, competence, and active agents of change. The Outlines of the National Medium and Long Term Educational Reform and Development Programme indicate that teachers are the key factors to the success of the Education Project (MoEPRC, 2010). In addition to the proposed Outlines, the Guidelines for CELTR emphasises that the teachers' qualities, levels, and abilities are the key elements that promote quality teaching (MoEPRC, 2016).

The reforms proposed for College English Language teaching were implemented in China with the main objectives of developing college students' abilities in using English for different occasions, enhancing their intercultural communication awareness and communicative competence, and developing the students into autonomous language learners who are capable of meeting personal, social, and national needs for development. The CELTR outlines guidelines for English language teachers that are aimed towards shifting their teaching approaches from the traditional teacher-centred to student-centred approach as well as other expectations that are required of EFL teachers. It is anticipated that CELTR will bring revolutionary changes to the teachers' attitudes, roles, and perceptions of English language teaching, teaching practice, and teachers' willingness for professional development. The CELTR provides opportunities for College English teachers to strengthen and build their professional development through various activities and training programmes.

Guo (2012) noted that the nature of professional development programmes available for teachers in China is continuous, flexible, and well-suited to their interests and working environment. The reform encourages teachers to engage in inquiry-based teaching methods and enhance their scientific approaches and research orientation in solving practical problems in the teaching and learning process. In addition, teachers are encouraged to work as a team in planning and conducting teaching as cooperative teaching activities. The CELTR has urged teachers to embark in multiple ways to enhance their professional development and this has placed a high level of expectation and stress on

the teachers to make the CELTR programme viable and effective. As a result, several studies have reported multiple challenges faced by EFL teachers in China. The teachers are required to shift their traditional role to student-centred teaching approaches and play key roles as facilitators, collaborators, researchers, team players, organisers, and instructors. In addition to the changing roles, teachers are burdened with onerous teaching tasks and training requirements.

Some of the setbacks and discrepancies in the process of English language teaching and EFL teachers' professional development include mass student enrolments, heavy teaching burdens, and poor awareness of the teachers' self-development (Rui, 2011). Zhao (2010) reported that teachers were frustrated and critical about the quality of the in-service training programmes available for their professional development. Furthermore, Zhao (2010) documented that teachers were not convinced and unclear regarding cooperative teaching activities. In addition, teachers viewed the demands as additional workloads that potentially hindered their autonomy in teaching practices (Song et al., 2013). Several challenges faced by English teachers in China have been documented such as the large class sizes that impede their autonomy in designing lessons and activities (Cheng & Wang, 2004), active engagement in teaching and research activities (Han & Yin, 2016), and ever-increasing in-service training demands (Guo et al., 2013).

A comprehensive review of the literature has revealed several factors that influence TPD. Firstly, it is important for teachers to recognise and internalise the aims and initiatives of the curriculum reform for the professional development of teachers. Fullan (2012) argued that cognitive dissonance between the understanding and proposed reforms impede educational changes and transformation. Lei and Medwell (2020) stated that although teachers were able to recognise the aims and advantages of professional development, some of the participants failed to recognise the term 'professional development' and were more familiar with training, collaborative teaching, classroom observation, reflection, and research activities. Secondly, evidence from empirical research has confirmed the importance of teachers' attitudes and their impact on professional development (Bayar, 2013; Torff & Sessions, 2008). The third potential factor identified from the literature review was academic communication activities which include the demand for teachers to engage in collaborative lesson planning and teaching active research and publication (Zhao, 2013), sharing sessions and peer coaching (Meng, 2014). The fourth critical factor identified was self-learning which is based on the teachers' initiatives and involvement in CELTR activities and professional development.

Self-learning is driven by the learners' sense of autonomy, moral obligations, and accountability, thereby allowing teachers to prepare themselves as competent professionals at their own space and pace. Self-directed professional development programmes are regarded as a fundamental factor for TPD (Mushayikwa & Lubben, 2009). Previous studies have confirmed that a high level of teachers' self-directed learning led to enhanced professional development (Djatkiko, 2011; Meng, 2014; Mushayikwa & Lubben, 2009). The fifth crucial factor that determines the success of professional development is teaching practice, which is consistent with the proposed recommendations by CELTR. The effectiveness of the school and curriculum reforms rely on the realisation of its objectives, in which teachers are able to explicitly demonstrate in their teaching practices a reflection of their deep understanding of CELTR (Mann, 2005; Nunez & Tellez, 2009).

Teaching practice is the foundation of their professional development, which is similar to a famous saying in China stating that "Practice is the criteria for testing truth". The final factor identified was teachers' reflection, which is an integrated process in the curriculum reform and TPD. Most of the teachers reflected on their teaching practices using conventional and written forms. Lei and Medwell (2020) highlighted that the teachers' reflection was a performance indicator for their promotion. In this context, the college EFL teachers can gradually understand and realise the significance and value of CELTR and identify new measures and approaches to improve their professional development. It is worth noting that the existing literature has not yet been explored for the effects of college English reforms on the professional development of EFL teachers, especially in newly upgraded colleges and universities in China.

Methodology

Research Goal

This study focuses on the influence of the reform on EFL teachers in terms of their knowledge and understanding of CELTR, attitudes towards the reform, academic communication activities, self-learning, teaching practices, reflection on teaching, and TPD. Although a substantial number of studies have focused on the effectiveness of professional development programmes, limited studies have explored the factors contributing to the professional development of teachers, especially those involving EFL teachers in China. Therefore, this study aims to shed new insights and knowledge on the professional development of EFL teachers in the context of CELTR. To address the research gap, this study aims to address the following research questions:

1. What are the EFL teachers' understanding, attitudes, academic communication activities, self-learning, teaching practice, teaching reflection, and professional development in implementing CELTR?

2. Are there any significant relationships between the EFL teachers' understanding, attitudes, academic communication activities, self-learning, teaching practice, teaching reflection, and their professional development in CELTR?
3. Which of the dependent variables, namely teachers' understanding, attitudes, academic communication activities, self-learning, teaching practice, and teaching reflection, significantly predict the professional development of college EFL teachers in the context of CELTR?

Research Design

This study employed the use of correlational research to provide empirical evidence for the relationships between EFL teachers' professional development and their understanding, attitudes, academic communication activities, self-learning, teaching practice, and teaching reflection in the context of CELTR. In this study, professional development is the independent variable, while the other six factors are dependent variables.

Sample and Data Collection

The effects of CELTR on the EFL teachers' professional development were investigated in this study. The target samples for this study were College English language teachers selected from a newly upgraded public university located in the Henan Province in Central China. In total, 92 of 102 College English language teachers in the Department of Public Foreign Teaching took part in the survey.

The questionnaire used for data collection consisted of three main sections. The first section assessed the demographic profile of the participants which include gender, years of teaching experience, and final degree earned. Sections B of the questionnaire contained survey items related to the six dependent variables, while section C contained items related to the independent variable, namely professional development. The demographic profile of the participants revealed that 89% (n = 81) of teachers were females and 11% (n = 11) were males. In terms of the academic qualifications of EFL teachers, 63% (n = 58) of the participants completed their first degree as their highest qualification, while 22.8% (n = 21) graduated and the remaining 14.2% (n = 13) obtained their doctorate degrees.

Data Collection Tools

To evaluate the professional development of College English language teachers in the context of CELTR, the professional development instrument previously validated by Rui (2011) was adopted in this study. The questionnaire developed by Rui (2011) was validated and acknowledged by the Authority of Research Centre for Foreign Teaching of China, whereby it was recognised as a mature and effective tool to study the professional development of teachers. The original tool was in the Chinese language and therefore, the questionnaire was translated into the English language using the back-translation technique. Furthermore, the questionnaire was validated by a panel of experts as suggested by Davis (1992). A pilot test for 50 participants was carried out and the reliability and validity of the questionnaire instruments were confirmed. The final survey questionnaire was prepared using both the English and Chinese languages. Furthermore, the final questionnaire employed in the study was further validated by a panel of three experts.

A pilot test comprising 50 participants from another university was carried out and the reliability and validity of the questionnaire instruments were confirmed. In the reliability analysis of the study, it was found that the computed coefficient for the whole questionnaire was 0.91 (N=45). The reliability coefficient for the three sections of the questionnaire ranged from 0.84 to 0.92 which confirmed the high reliability of the questionnaire (Drost, 2011).

In the questionnaire, the first section evaluated the demographic profile of the participants based on their gender, years of teaching experience, and final degree earned. Section B of the questionnaire contained survey items related to the six dependent variables, while section C contained items related to the independent variable, namely professional development. A total of 43 items comprising of TPD (6 items), teachers' understanding (5 items), attitudes (5 items), academic communication activities (5 items), self-learning (6 items), teaching practice (8 items), and self-reflection (8 items) was used in the instrument. A five-point Likert scale ranging from strongly agree to disagree was used to collect the responses, in which strongly agree and disagree were coded as 5 and 1, respectively. The survey questionnaire was distributed to the College English teachers and participation in the survey was done voluntarily. The instructions were provided in the questionnaire and the teachers were informed about the purpose of the research. The respondents completed the survey in approximately 15 minutes. The Cronbach's Alpha of the scales for the various variables evaluated ranged from 0.84 to 0.92.

Data Analysis

For quantitative data analysis, the SPSS statistical software version 22.0 was employed for statistical analysis upon verifying the dataset for missing data and outliers. To ensure the appropriateness to conduct multiple regression analysis, the assumptions for normality, linearity, multicollinearity, homoscedasticity, autocorrelation and multivariate

outliers all of which refer to various distributions of data and relationships among variables were analysed for the data of the current study. These assumptions for normality, homoscedasticity was tested by analysing the Probability plot P-P plot and scatter plot. The scatter plot of the residuals shows that residuals are roughly distributed in a rectangular fashion and the predictors are linearly related to the criterion. Therefore, the homoscedasticity of the sample is ensured. Further, the graph confirms there is no sign of obvious outliers and all the standardized residuals lie between 3.3 to -3.3 as expected. The normality of the data was verified using skewness and kurtosis. According to Sekaran (2003), data with skewness values within the range of -2 to +2 and kurtosis values within the range of -3 to +3 is considered to be within the normal range. The dataset displayed a normal distribution and was deemed appropriate for inferential statistics.

Results

To address the first research question, the mean and standard deviation values were computed, and the findings are presented in Table 1. The results indicated that the mean scores of teachers' understanding (M = 3.64, SD = 0.52), attitudes (M = 4.05, SD = 0.47), self-learning (M = 3.28, SD = 0.63), teaching practice (M = 4.02, SD = 0.45), self-reflection (M = 3.67, SD = 0.46), and professional development (M = 3.62, SD = 0.58) were at a moderate level, except for teachers' academic communication activities (M = 2.77, SD = 0.78) which displayed a low score.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics of the study variables (N = 92)

Variables	Mean	SD
Teachers' understanding	3.64	.52
Teachers' attitudes	4.05	.47
Teachers' academic communication activities	2.77	.78
Teachers' self-learning	3.28	.63
Teaching practice	4.02	.45
Teachers' self-reflection	3.67	.46
Teachers' professional development	3.62	.58

(Scale: 5 = Strongly agree; 4 = Agree; 3 = Neutral; 2 = Disagree; 1 = Strongly disagree)

To investigate the relationships between the teachers' understanding, teachers' attitudes, academic communication activities, teachers' self-learning, teaching practice, teaching reflection, and teachers' professional development, Pearson's correlational analysis was performed and the results are shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Inter-correlation analysis between the variables (N = 92)

Variables	TPD	TU	TA	TAC	TSL	TP	TSR
Teacher Professional Development (TPD)	1						
Teachers' understanding (TU)	.676**	1					
Teachers' attitudes (TA)	.510**	.329**	1				
Academic communication activities (TAC)	.200	.436**	.268**	1			
Teachers' self-learning (TSL)	.379**	.330**	.407**	.480**	1		
Teaching practice (TP)	.536**	.418**	.453**	.153	.228*	1	
Teachers' self-reflection (TSR)	.550**	.350**	.416**	.349**	.372**	.379**	1

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

* . Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

The relationship between the study variables was analysed using Pearson's correlation coefficient. The results indicated that the dependent variable, TPD, has a positive and significant relationship with all the independent variables except for the academic communication activities of the EFL teachers. Furthermore, the inter-correlation matrix confirmed that all the correlation coefficient values were below 0.7, thereby confirming that there is no issue of multicollinearity among the study variables. The results indicated that TPD has a positive and significant relationship with the teachers' understanding (r = 0.676, p < .001), teachers' attitudes (r = 0.510, p < .001), teachers' self-learning (r = 0.379, p < .001), teaching practice (r = 0.536, p < .001), and teaching reflection (r = 0.550, p < .001).

Additionally, the relationship between the teachers' understanding and teachers' attitudes (r = 0.329, p < .001), academic communication activities (r = 0.436, p < .001), teachers' self-learning (r = 0.330, p < .001), teaching practice (r = 0.418, p < .001), and self-reflection (r = 0.350, p < .001) was low, positive, and significant. Similarly, the correlation coefficients between the teachers' attitudes and academic communication activities, teachers' self-learning, teaching practice, and self-reflection were low, positive, and significant (r = 0.268, p < .001; r = 0.407, p < .001; (r = 0.453, p < .001 and r = 0.416, p < .001 respectively). These results further confirmed that the relationship between the teachers' academic activities in implementing CELTR showed a low, positive, and significant relationship with teachers' self-learning (r = 0.480, p < .001) and teachers' self-reflection (r = 0.349, p < .001). The relationship between self-learning and teaching practice and self-reflection (r = 0.228, p < .001 and r = 0.372, p < .001 respectively) was also low, positive,

and significant. Likewise, the relationship between teaching practice and self-reflection was low, positive, and significant ($r = 0.379$, $p < .001$).

A stepwise multiple regression analysis was conducted to study the predictors and their contribution in predicting the criterion. In this study, the prediction of a single dependent variable using six independent variables was performed as shown in Table 3.

Table 3. Stepwise Regression Models Predicting Teacher Professional Development

Model	R	R ²	Adjusted R ²	Std. Error	Change Statistics				
					R ² Change	F Change	df1	df2	Sig. F Change
1	.676 ^a	.456	.450	.43374	.456	75.551	1	90	.000**
2	.684 ^b	.468	.456	.43131	.012	2.020	1	89	.159
3	.692 ^c	.479	.462	.42926	.011	1.851	1	88	.177
4	.693 ^d	.480	.456	.43157	.001	.060	1	87	.806
5	.715 ^e	.511	.483	.42082	.031	5.503	1	86	.021*
6	.747 ^f	.558	.527	.40253	.047	8.993	1	85	.004*

* $p < 0.05$ ** $p < 0.001$

a. Predictors: (Constant), Teachers' understanding

b. Predictors: (Constant), Teachers' understanding, teachers' attitudes

c. Predictors: (Constant), Teachers' understanding, teachers' attitudes, academic communication activities

d. Predictors: (Constant), Teachers' understanding, teachers' attitudes, academic communication activities, teachers' self-learning

e. Predictors: (Constant), Teachers' understanding, teachers' attitudes, academic communication activities, teachers' self-learning, teaching practice

f. Predictors: (Constant), Teachers' understanding, teachers' attitudes, academic communication activities, teachers' self-learning, teaching practice, self-reflection

Dependent Variable: Teachers' Professional Development

The six-step regression analysis was performed to identify which of the six independent variables best predicted the value of the dependent variable of this study. The results of the six-step regression analysis are shown in Table 3. To confirm the absence of multicollinearity among the independent variables, the tolerance values and variance inflation factor (VIF) were analysed. The tolerance values for all the independent variables in the regression analysis were not very low or near zero. Furthermore, the VIF analysis confirmed that all the VIF values were below 10. These results confirmed the uni-dimensionality of the independent variables and the absence of multicollinearity among the variables of the study. Therefore, the data were considered suitable for regression analysis.

The results of the stepwise regression analysis are presented in Table 4. The results revealed that 55.8% of the TPD could be explained by the predictor variables, namely teachers' understanding, teachers' attitudes, academic communication activities, teachers' self-learning, teaching practice, and teaching reflection. According to the variance analysis, the results for models 1, 5, and 6 were significant. In the first stage of the stepwise multiple regression, the incorporation of the teachers' understanding in the model was a significant factor in predicting TPD ($\beta = .676$; $t = 8.692$, $p < 0.001$) with a variance of 45.6% (Table 4). Additionally, the F statistic ($F(1, 90) = 75.551$, $p < 0.001$) confirmed that model 1 was significant. When the teachers' attitude was incorporated into the second stage, the model explained approximately 46.8% of the variance in TPD. However, the F statistic revealed that the teachers' attitudes were not a significant predictor of TPD (R^2 change = .012).

Table 4. Stepwise Regression Models Predicting Teacher Professional Development

Model		Unstandardised Coefficients		Standardised Coefficients	t	p	95% C.I		Multicollinearity	
		B	S. E	Beta			Lower Bound	Upper Bound	Tolerance	VIF
Step 1	(Constant)	.870	.320		2.719	.008	.234	1.506		
	TU	.756	.087	.676	8.692	.000**	.583	.929	1.000	1.000
Step 2	(Constant)	.533	.397		1.343	.183	-.256	1.322		
	TU	.657	.111	.587	5.904	.000**	.436	.878	.605	1.654
	TA	.172	.121	.141	1.421	.159	-.069	.413	.605	1.654
Step 3	(Constant)	.571	.396		1.441	.153	-.216	1.358		
	TU	.714	.119	.638	6.027	.000**	.479	.950	.527	1.896
	TA	.171	.121	.140	1.415	.161	-.069	.411	.605	1.654
	TAC	-.087	.064	-.116	-1.361	.177	-.215	.040	.810	1.235

Table 4. Continued

Model	Unstandardised Coefficients		Standardised Coefficients	t	p	95% C.I		Multicollinearity		
	B	S. E	Beta			Lower Bound	Upper Bound	Tolerance	VIF	
Step 4	(Constant)	.578	.399		1.448	.151				
	TU	.728	.132	.651	5.530	.000**	.466	.990	.432	2.314
	TA	.172	.121	.141	1.413	.161	-.070	.413	.604	1.655
	TACA	-.080	.072	-.106	-1.110	.270	-.222	.063	.655	1.526
	TSL	-.025	.101	-.027	-.246	.806	-.226	.176	.488	2.050
Step 5	(Constant)	.134	.433		.310	.757				
	TU	.650	.133	.581	4.904	.000**	.387	.914	.405	2.469
	TA	.011	.137	.009	.081	.936	-.261	.283	.453	2.208
	TACA	-.075	.070	-.100	-1.074	.286	-.214	.064	.655	1.527
	TSL	.011	.100	.012	.105	.916	-.188	.209	.477	2.098
	TP	.311	.132	.242	2.346	.021**	.047	.574	.536	1.867
Step 6	(Constant)	.278	.436		.637	.526				
	TU	.610	.128	.545	4.784	.000**	.357	.864	.401	2.497
	TA	-.071	.134	-.058	-.529	.598	-.336	.195	.434	2.303
	TACA	-.075	.067	-.100	-1.121	.265	-.208	.058	.655	1.527
	TSL	-.090	.101	-.098	-.887	.377	-.291	.111	.425	2.355
	TP	.283	.127	.220	2.225	.029**	.030	.535	.533	1.877
	TSR	.363	.121	.288	2.999	.004**	.122	.603	.565	1.770

Dependent Variable: Teacher Professional Development

TU=Teachers' Understanding; TA=Teachers' Attitudes, TACA=Academic Communication Activities, TSL=Teachers' Self-learning, TP= Teaching Practice, TSR =Self- reflection

In the third stage of the regression analysis, the incorporation of the teachers' academic communication activities into the model confirmed that it was a non-significant predictor for TPD. The third model accounted for 47.9% of the variance for the dependent variable although the change in R^2 (R^2 change = .011) was very low and non-significant. In the fourth stage of the regression analysis, the incorporation of teachers' self-learning in the model revealed that self-learning was not a significant predictor (R^2 change = .001) of TPD. This was followed by the incorporation of teaching practice as a predictor of TPD in model 5. The results confirmed that teaching practice was a significant ($\beta = .242$; $t = 2.346$, $p < 0.05$) predictor of TPD with an overall variance of 51.1%. The F statistic ($F(1, 86) = 5.503$, $p < 0.05$) and the change in R^2 (R^2 change = .031) were also significant.

In the last stage of the stepwise regression analysis, the teaching reflection was incorporated into the model and identified as a significant predictor of TPD (R^2 change = .047; $F(1, 85) = 8.993$, $p < 0.05$). The results confirmed that the β value was significant ($\beta = .288$; $t = 2.999$, $p < 0.05$) for the teachers' reflection as indicated in Table 4. In the final model of the stepwise regression analysis, teachers' understanding ($\beta = .545$; $t = 4.784$, $p < 0.001$) of CELTR was considered as the most significant predictor of TPD among the six predictor variables. The second independent variable that influenced TPD was teaching reflection ($\beta = .288$; $t = 2.999$, $p < 0.05$), and the third significant predictor was teaching practice ($\beta = .220$; $t = 2.225$, $p < 0.05$).

Discussion

Several important findings that contribute to the understanding of EFL teachers' professional development were identified in this study. Firstly, it can be concluded that the teachers' understanding, attitudes, self-learning, teaching practice, self-reflection, and TPD were at a moderate level, while their involvement in academic communication activities was at a low level. Secondly, TPD showed positive and significant relationships with all the dependent variables except for academic communication activities. Finally, this study provided empirical evidence for the identification of key factors that influenced the EFL teachers' professional development. The stepwise regression analysis results revealed that three factors, namely teachers' understanding of CELTR, teaching practice, and teachers' self-reflection, were significant predictors of TPD in the context of CELTR implementation. In addition, among the three significant predictors, the teachers' understanding was the most influential predictor, followed by self-reflection and teaching practice. However, factors such as teachers' attitudes, teachers' academic communication activities, and teachers' self-learning did not appear to have any effect on TPD.

Based on these findings, several research outcomes can be established for the understanding of EFL teachers' professional development. The three contributing factors identified in this study for TPD are consistent with the three prominent features highlighted in the Revised Curriculum Standards. These features include embracing the renewal of teachers' content knowledge, constant development of teaching techniques, and constant reflection of their teaching

practices in creating an inquiry-based and cooperative learning culture that is aimed towards the English language teachers' professional development (Ministry of Education [MoE], 2012).

The findings of this study also indicate that the understanding of CELTR is crucial for TPD in terms of improving teaching quality, teachers' performance, and career development. Teachers are the key implementers of curriculum reforms and therefore, their understanding is imperative for the sustainability of the programmes developed. A deep understanding of the contextual factors, content knowledge, and pedagogical approaches that have initiated the formulation of CELTR is central to the implementation of revolutionary changes in EFL teaching and learning experiences. Teachers need to understand the principles underlying the curriculum reforms, accept the content and pedagogical changes for the implementation of the new curriculum, and transform themselves as active agents of change. The teachers' professional development and educational reforms are reciprocal (Zhu, 2010) and the success of the curriculum reform lies in the active involvement of teachers. Thus, the findings of this study broadly support previous studies that have demonstrated the importance of the teachers' understanding of curriculum reforms and changes. For instance, Richards (2001) indicated that the key determinants for the success of language reforms depend on the teachers' understanding of the underlying contextual factors that initiated the reforms. In addition, EFL teachers must have a good understanding of the reforms, demonstrate a high level of knowledge, autonomy, and decision-making skills in selecting and preparing authentic learning materials (MoE, 2012), and be willing to participate in the EFL professional development (Petrie & McGee, 2012). Likewise, Fullan (2012) noted that teachers are the key players and their views and perceptions determine the success of the educational reforms. Furthermore, dissonance and lack of knowledge and understanding of the reform process can impede the implementation of the educational reforms. Therefore, it is envisaged that a good understanding of the reform will enable teachers to critically evaluate the potential issues, trends, and problems related to the teaching and learning of English (Louws et al., 2017).

Another important finding in this study revealed that the curriculum reform encouraged teachers to engage in constant reflective practices which, in turn, enabled them to become problem-solvers in providing quality teaching and learning experiences. Reflection, as previously noted in several literature studies, is an important tool for personal growth and professional development. Reflection on teaching serves as a channel for teachers to engage with their professional development (Fullerton, 2013). This finding is encouraging as it shows that EFL teachers set periodical professional learning goals and concurrent actions and reflections to improve themselves from time to time. These findings are consistent with the study by Lei and Medwell (2020) who reported that the majority of English language teachers were engaged in constant reflective practices. Besides, Louws et al. (2017) noted that teachers who had a better understanding of the potential issues, trends, and problems associated with or affecting their teaching would develop intentions to tackle these problems or keep up with the latest developments.

More importantly, teaching practice in this study was identified as the primary factor affecting TPD. The findings confirmed that EFL teachers have reoriented their knowledge, attitudes, and beliefs according to the reforms and translated these reforms into classroom practices. Since curriculum change is a continuous and inevitable process, teachers are constantly experiencing new curriculum changes or reforms at various intervals. These reforms are materialised through teaching practices that are aimed at improving students' outcomes. Hence, teaching practices performed according to the curriculum reforms allow teachers to re-evaluate their skills in pedagogical practices and upgrade their knowledge to meet the curriculum requirements. Moreover, the success of the new curriculum reforms is viable through pedagogical changes and teaching practices.

Various studies have supported the need for teaching practice in enhancing TPD. For instance, Desimone (2009) stated that effective teacher professional development is the consequence of the changes in the teachers' beliefs, knowledge, attitudes, and teaching practices. In addition, Dilekli and Tezci. (2019) acknowledged that to promote thinking generation, teachers' teaching practices is key factor. As a result, an individual's existing knowledge, beliefs, and attitude heavily influence the acquisition and construction of new knowledge. Besides, Fullerton (2013) indicated that teaching practice is the reflection of the outcome of the teachers' professional development and it is usually evaluated to identify the shifts in the teaching approaches, methods, and instructions used by teachers. From a constructive perspective, teachers need to be more accommodative and adaptive to the assimilation of new knowledge, beliefs, teaching, and learning processes for the successful implementation of CELTR. Mann (2005) previously stated that TPD resulted in changes to the teaching practices. Likewise, Nunez and Tellez (2009) found that teaching practice was reflective of the effectiveness of TPD and, in turn, provided a positive relationship between teachers' teaching practice and professional development.

Surprisingly, this study showed that the teachers' attitudes, academic communication activities, and self-learning did not contribute to the EFL teachers' professional development. Moreover, the teachers' academic communication activities participation rate was also low. Kwakman (2003) highlighted discrepancies between the theoretical and real-life opportunities for professional learning at the workplace. Studies have shown evidence of reform success when the professional development of teachers was prioritised in the reform (Villegas-Reimers, 2003). In contrast, the failures in reform implementation were due to insufficient teachers' knowledge and understanding, attitudes, and beliefs (Klette, 2002). Nevertheless, the data in this study revealed that the teachers' understanding has a significant impact on professional development and is positively associated with the success of the reform.

Implications of the Study

Overall, this study has revealed significant insights into the factors that influence the professional development of teachers in the reform process. Firstly, the teachers' understanding, teaching practice, and self-reflection represent crucial aspects of the professional development of teachers. However, the teachers are functioning in an isolated and individualised manner with limited involvement in academic communication activities, as evidenced by the results of this study. Secondly, it is recommended that institutions find strategies to strengthen the teachers' engagement in academic communication activities, attitudes, and self-learning. It is important to create professional learning communities to provide a channel for the teachers to work collaboratively in the planning, monitoring, and evaluation of the reform process. Finally, the outcomes of this study have implications for the policymakers in revisiting and reviewing the professional development of EFL teachers and taking effective measures to ensure the success of the reform.

The findings of this study also offer some implications to the Provincials' Bureau of Education in China. The CELTR was implemented with a noble aspiration to improve teacher quality and student learning under the College English language teaching and learning process. It is hoped that the Bureau of Education can perhaps gain some insights from such research findings towards channeling more funds for teachers' professional development so that EFL teachers have the option to attend international symposiums for knowledge exchange and learning. Besides that, it could also provide sabbatical leave to teachers to visit and learning from other EFL teachers in other universities both within and outside China. The Bureau of Education in most of the provinces could also look into providing better facilities and resources in terms of both software and hardware to support EFL teachers for their professional development and to improve EFL lecturer quality across China.

Limitations and study forward

Despite the significant findings, there are a few limitations that need to be addressed in this study. Firstly, the samples in this study were selected from a newly upgraded public university and it is, therefore, necessary to exercise caution for the interpretation of the results obtained. Secondly, this study employed the use of an empirical and cross-sectional research design to address the research questions. Thirdly, the instruments used in the study were based on self-reported measures, in which more information on the comparison of social norms and practices could affect the overall findings. It is envisaged that future studies should be undertaken to examine the interplay of the demographic variables, mediators, and moderators in the relationships of the study variables. Furthermore, future studies could be undertaken on teachers' self-efficacy in the use of technology integrated EFL teaching practices and the need for teachers' professional development considering the technological skills as highlighted by Nikitova et al. (2020).

Conclusion

TPD plays an essential role in determining the quality of education throughout the education system in a country. The objectives of CELTR are aimed for general English language teaching as well as teaching English for practical use such as academic, vocational, cultural, and social communications. Therefore, the continuous improvement of EFL teachers is required to meet the new objectives of the CELTR. The outcomes of this study revealed that the EFL teachers in the public university had a proper understanding and positive attitude towards the CELTR. In addition, the CELTR enhanced the teachers' teaching practice by shifting their conventional teaching approaches to an interactive and active teaching approach as well as reflecting on their teaching practices. Among the different aspects examined in this study, the teachers' understanding of CELTR had the most significant effect on TPD. This observation indicated that when EFL teachers had a better understanding of the requirements of CELTR, they were intrinsically motivated to engage in their professional development through different channels and activities.

On the other hand, other aspects such as teaching reflection were also critical in influencing TPD and it was used as a self-learning method towards their professional development. The common channels used by EFL teachers for the enhancement of their professional development include peer observation and learning, reading books and articles, watching relevant videos, attending training activities, and teaching reflection. Hence, it is recommended that teachers' reflection should be set as the mandatory requirement for the teachers' annual evaluation to ensure the professional development of EFL teachers and the success of the reform.

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