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EFL Teacher Professional Development Practices in Beninese Secondary Schools

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ABSTRACT

Whether EFL teachers are qualified or not, they need to keep abreast of recent developments in their field. There lies the importance of professional development which can be carried out through mentorship, lesson observation, and collaborative discussion with colleagues (Ur, 2012), or through E-portfolios (Xerri and Campbell, 2016). This paper aims at investigating the practices of EFL teacher development and identifying related challenges. It is also intended to make suggestions for the improvement of professional development in Beninese secondary schools. In that regard, a questionnaire was administered to 80 teachers in three different schools in Cotonou. The findings revealed that weekly professional developments are organized in the schools. During these meetings issues discussed include lesson planning, learner assessment, teaching experiences to mention just a few. Other professional development strategies such as reflective teaching, area professional development workshops, participation in webinars have also been recorded. Challenges to the professional development mentioned by respondents are lack of documentation, lack of administrative support, and the fact that the coordinators of the weekly professional development meetings are not creative. Suggestions for improvement focus on the need for teachers to be mindful of their own professional growth and provision of adequate document and support on the part of educational authorities.

Key words: Teachers; EFL; secondary education; professional development

1. Introduction

Teaching is a demanding job in that it requires not only subject-matter knowledge but also knowledge in educational psychology and pedagogy. Knowledge in these three areas is constantly evolving and EFL teachers should keep abreast of new developments in their field to perform well in their classes. Moreover, untrained and part time teachers outnumber qualified and full-time teachers in most secondary schools in Benin. As a consequence, professional development activities serve both as pre-service training and in-service training for unqualified English language teachers. The issue of teacher development becomes critical for the quality of EFL education in secondary schools in the country.

Furthermore, most research endeavours on teacher development focuses on specific aspects of professional development and do not portray a comprehensive picture of the issue in a given context. For instance, Xerri and Campbell (2016) concentrated on E-portfolios whereas Gnawali

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(2016) studied the importance of professional organization for teacher development in Nepal. On the contrary, this study covers many aspects of professional development and shed light on how EFL teacher professional development works in secondary school context. This investigation has been carried out to explore the professional development practices in Beninese secondary schools, identify the challenges related to professional development, and suggest solutions to the identified challenges. Therefore, three research questions have been addressed: What are the professional development practices in Beninese secondary schools?; What are the challenges to professional development? and How can professional development be improved?

Before the description of the procedures used to carry out the study, the theoretical underpinnings as well as the practice of teacher development are explored in details.

1.1 Theoretical Underpinnings of Teacher Professional Development

Professional development is first and foremost a matter of adult education. For that reason, the approach recommended for its effectiveness is the constructivist one in as much previous experiences of adults should be tapped into when training them (Baker, 2016). For that reason, it is recommended to involve teachers in the planning of professional development activities that concern them and make the content of the activities relevant to the problems they are confronted with and teachers. Teachers should also be given the opportunity to apply whatever they have learnt during the training (Knowles, 1984). It follows that teachers should play an active role in their professional development, they should be given the opportunity to learn from one another but most importantly, they should not be treated like empty tanks to be filled with knowledge by somebody else (Johnson, 2006; Brown, 2007).

As mentioned earlier, adult education should not be conducted in the same way as child or teenage education. Adults´ ways of learning or knowing are factored into EFL teacher development programmes. Building on a study by Kagan (1991), Drago-Severson (2004) identifies three categories of

adult learners. The first category includes *instrumental knowers* who learn more when a process is described step-by-step, *socializing knowers* who learn better when they get information from experts and *self-authoring knowers* who learn more when they are given the opportunity to take full responsibility for their learning and practice (Crandall and Miller, 2014, p. 631). However, given that those in charge of implementing teacher development programmes may not be aware of the type of knowers they are dealing with, they will serve teachers better by varying their instructional delivery methods in order to reach as many participants as possible.

Apart from the knowledge of adult learning styles, the effectiveness of professional development depends on two other factors: culture and institutional performance goals. Taking into account local culture can facilitate teachers´ buy-in. For instance, Baker (2016) found that in the Thai culture, "learning should be fun" (p. 38), which implies that if a trainer is too serious, teachers may not pay much attention to what he has to teach them. In other contexts, making fun during a training might be a sign that what is being taught should not be taken seriously. On the other hand, linking school performance goals to professional development enables to get better results in that teachers work together as a learning community or a community of practice (Crandall and Miller, 2014; Hedgcock, 2002).

The effectiveness of professional development also depends on a number of approaches that are likely to enhance teachers´ institutional as well as subject-matter knowledge (Lv, 2014). Wallace (1991, as cited by Crandall and Miller, 2014, p. 632) identified three such approaches. In the apprenticeship approach to teacher development, younger teachers learn from more experienced ones. In the applied science approach, teachers apply in their classrooms what they have learnt from research and experts whereas in the reflective approach, teachers constantly adapt their practice through critical thinking and research. Most EFL teacher development practices fall within one of these three approaches.

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In today´s globalized and IT world, EFL teachers have myriads of opportunities for development provided they are ready to grab one. Discussing all available opportunities is beyond the scope of this paper. Only the most salient and teacher-friendly ones have been flagged.

1.2 EFL Teacher Development Opportunities or Practices

There are various taxonomies of EFL teacher development opportunities (Brown, 2007; Ur, 2012; Crandall and Miller, 2014). However, for the purpose of this paper, I have grouped them into three categories: classroom-based opportunities; teacher collaboration opportunities, and reading and reading and writing opportunities.

1.2.1 Classroom-based Opportunities

Classroom-base opportunities include lesson or classroom observation and action research. The main form of classroom observation is peer observation for development. Even though it takes teachers some courage to accept their peers in their classes, peer observation contribute to professional development insofar as it gives teachers the opportunity to hear comments on their instructional delivery and to get new insights (Brown, 2007; Ur, 2012). To avoid the embarrassment that might arise from lesson observation, Ur (2012) suggests that teachers could arrange mutual observations as these will enable them to create a "spirit of collegiality in the workplace [through] the sharing of best practices…" (Shousha, 2015, p. 131). But it is the feedback that follows lesson observations that contribute to professional development. Therefore, a helpful feedback includes targeted, substantiated, and specific comments (positive and negative) from the observer and input from the observed (Kraft and Papay, 2014; Ur, 2012).

As for action research, it is defined as research carried out by teachers to understand and resolve a problem in their classroom (Bailey, 2001; Ur, 2012; Brown, 2007). According to Brown (2007), action research falls perfectly within the constructivist approach to professional development, especially in this era of communicative language teaching (CLT). In CLT, teachers are to assess their contexts and students on an ongoing basis and design instructional techniques tailored to the contexts and students. Various procedures have been suggested to conduct action research. For Bailey (2001), when a problem is identified, an action is planned and conducted, observations are made and the teacher reflects on them and another action is planned in case the problem is not solved. On his part, Ur (2012) suggests a seven-step procedure but it still start with the identification of a problem and ends with the redefinition of the problem in case the implemented solution does not resolve the problem. The process of action research is quite simple and it can be carried out by teachers on various issues related to their teaching practice. But for their professional development, teachers can also collaborate among themselves.

1.2.2   Teacher Collaboration opportunities

Collaborative opportunities include but are not limited to professional organizations, peer coaching, mentorship, and staff meetings. Professional organizations offer diversified advantages to their members such as individual and institutional networking (Gnawali, 2016; Crandall and Miller, 2014). For instance, the Nepal English Language Teachers Association developed links with the U.S. Embassy and the British Council, which gave some of its members the opportunity to "attend degree courses and short-term courses at home and overseas" (Gnawali, 2016, p. 174). Besides, most professional organizations publish journals and subscription to some of them is free after payment of membership fees. As a member of a professional organization, EFL teachers have the opportunity to contribute to the improvement of EFL instructional standards, programme evaluation and to the promotion of best practices (Crandall and Miller, 2014).

The importance of professional organizations cannot be overstated but peer coaching also plays a pivotal role in EFL teacher professional development in that it enables teachers to "assist each other in enhancing their teaching in an atmosphere of collegial trust" (Kinsella, 1994, p. 35). This statement shows that peer coaching provides an opportunity for mutual support but it works well only if teachers succeed in building trust among themselves as in the case of the classroom observation for development

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discussed earlier. Mentorship is a typical example of peer coaching and it is a perfect illustration of the apprenticeship approach to professional development broached upon in the theoretical underpinnings. The mentor´s role is to meet the mentee on a regular basis to discuss issues such as classroom management, grading, homework, transitions between activities, school policies, and what not (Crandall and Miller, 2014; Ur, 2012; Brown, 2007). From a practical perspective, as suggested by Ur (2012), a mentor can also observe lessons taught by the mentee and give feedback on the mentee´s instructional delivery or invite the mentee to follow some of his lessons to see pedagogy in action.

Further, staff meetings also provide professional growth opportunities in as much as they allow for "common planning time" (Kraft and Papay, 2014, p. 478), thus enabling teachers to receive input from one another. Staff meetings can also serve as a forum of experience sharing in which teachers discuss instructional challenges and outstanding successes and for that reason, they may be extended to teachers of other disciplines from time to time because pedagogical breakthroughs in the teaching of those disciplines may prove useful for EFL teachers (Ur, 2012).

In addition to the foregoing, there are other personal opportunities teachers can tap into in order to grow professionally.

1.2.3   Reading and Writing Opportunities

Here, the focus is on professional journals, presentation at conferences, and reflective teaching. Despite their busy schedules, EFL teachers must find time for reading if they want to hone their teaching skills. While reading can substitute for courses and conferences to a certain extent, "courses and conferences are no substitute for reading" (Ur, 2012, p. 293). As a consequence, Brown (2007) suggests that teachers can boost reading by practicing skimming, scanning, and note-taking and by setting writing goals for more focused and selective reading. To that effect, teachers can choose from a wide array of reading materials both in print or online. Websites that English language teachers may find useful include but not at all limited to Linguist List (www.linguistlist.com); the

Education Alliance at Brown University (www.lab.brown.edu/ae_ells.php), TTV by Russell Stannard (www.teachertrainingvideaos.com), and www.NGL.Cengage.com/tesfl (Crandall and Miller, 2014).

One of the productive skills teachers teach in their classes is writing and they cannot do so successfully without being conversant with writing themselves. In the same way as setting writing goals can stimulate reading, planning to give presentations at conferences can stimulate writing in teachers. However, to do the king of writing that can be presented at conferences, teachers must conduct research, whether it is action research as mentioned earlier or research to answer questions classrooms, learners or instructional practices (Crandall and Miller, 2014). By engaging in research, teachers will put an end to the abnormal situation in education where teachers do education and researchers or experts think about it (Meek, 1991). But to be able to conduct scientific research whose findings can be presented at conferences, teachers who are not in the higher learning sector must be trained or read about the principles of research to avoid complacency and subjectivity since scientific research is systematic and subject to professional scrutiny and review (Shavelson and Towne, 2002).

In terms of personal initiative, teachers can also reflect on their teaching. This is all the more critical since Kraft and Papay (2014) contend that school principals should "facilitate opportunities for teachers to reflect on their practice" (p. 478). Crandall and Miller (2014) went further and clarified that teachers must reflect on their teaching by keeping a teaching journal or a portfolio. Teaching journals are used by teachers to record classroom events, success stories, and insights about themselves to mention but a few (Brown, 2007; Ur, 2012; Crandall and Miller, 2014). However, recording events in the journal is not enough. Entries must be written on a regular basis and teachers have to set aside time to review such entries if they want to draw the full growth potential of their teaching journals.

As far as portfolios are concerned, Richards and Schmidt (2010) define them as "a purposeful collection of work that provides information about

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someone´s efforts, progress or achievement in a given area" (p. 443). An EFL teacher portfolio may include texts, audio and video files, reflections, beliefs, and principles (Brown, 2007; Crandall and Miller, 2014). In some contexts, the use of portfolios is compulsory and some indications are given on their contents. The policy that introduced print portfolios in the ELT sector in Malta in 2012 stipulated that each portfolio was to include a number of items such as "CPD attendance certificates, self-evaluation forms, reports on observed lessons, etc." even though each portfolio should be adapted to local conditions (Xerri and Campbell, 2016, p. 393). As such, in areas where information technology is easily accessible, it is better for teachers to keep e-portfolios in that they are easily accessible to administrators who can quickly give formative feedback on such portfolios. It is worth underscoring that the outcomes of reflective teaching and journaling can be easily included into a portfolio.

2. Methodology of the Study

The study combines qualitative and quantitative approaches even though it is mostly qualitative. A 12-item questionnaire was designed to shed light on the status of the participating teachers, issues discussed during the weekly professional development meetings, other professional development activities in which teachers participate as well as challenges and suggestions for the improvement of professional development in Beninese secondary schools. The questionnaire includes open-ended as well as closed items in order to maximize reliability as suggested by Cohen et al. (2007).

The questionnaire was administered to 80 secondary school teachers in three different urban schools in Cotonou. After many follow-up calls to some teachers, 54 completed questionnaires were returned, which means a return rate of 67.5 percent. For the data analysis, I used the hand analysis procedure suggested by Creswell (2012) for small samples. Before coding the data, I copied all the qualitative responses on index cards with one single idea per card. The coding procedure consisted in putting together cards with similar ideas and

using a small post-it to label each group of cards. After reducing the redundancies of the codes, I collapsed "the codes into themes" (Creswell, 2012, p. 244) and proceeded with interpretation.

3. Findings of the study

The data revealed that teachers who participated in the study have diversified teaching experiences as shown in the frequency distribution table below.

Table 1: Frequency distribution table of teaching experiences

n (years)	f
3	6
4	6
5	7
7	4
8	7
9	6
10	8
15	4
16	2
18	3
26	1

The teaching experiences vary from 3 to 26 years. The youngest teachers have been teaching at least for three years at the time the investigation was conducted. The data have been analyzed along three main lines including professional development strategies used in the selected schools, challenges and suggestions for improvement.

3.1 Professional Development Strategies Used in the Selected Schools

The study revealed that many professional development strategies are used in the investigated schools. For instance, 24 out of 54 respondents reported that they had been mentored by more experienced teachers at the beginning of their teaching career, which is not the case with the other 30. However, it is difficult to know where the mentored teachers started their career. As for the weekly professional development meetings, almost 89 percent reported that they attended such meetings on a regular basis while 3 stated that they participated sometimes. This implies that most

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teachers are aware of the importance of those meetings for their professional advancement.

During those weekly meetings, a wide range of issues are discussed. The first issue is related to teachers´ concerns as shown through the following statements: "difficulties encountered by teachers when teaching"; "the problems we are confronted to in class"; "teachers´ problems in teaching and how to help them". Not only do teachers discuss their problems but they also try to find solutions to overcome the problems. Close to the concerns is the topic of classroom management exemplified as follows: "classroom management"; "How to behave in front of our students"; "We always talk about classroom management"; "discipline problems". It is worth noting that the phrase "classroom management" has been used several times even though no explanation is found in the responses about its meaning but some respondents have been specific to indicate that they discuss the behaviours teachers should adopt in their classrooms.

Instructional improvement has also been mentioned as one of the issues often discussed by the teachers as the following statements show clearly: "How to teach and how to make learners understand the English language"; "improving teaching ways"; "How to improve our teaching methods"; "How to teach certain lessons"; "How to conduct the different learning situations"; "How to overcome teaching challenges"; "We often discuss the means to better our level as EFL teachers and the best way to transmit the lesson to the students and to assess them". Not only do teachers discuss what to do to improve their teaching practices, but they also tackle the issue of self-improvement, certainly in terms knowledge of the subject they teach.

Learner assessment was also discussed. Here are some statements made by the respondents about it: "How to submit exam papers"; "How to evaluate our pupils/students"; "Decide on exam papers"; "How to prepare a test"; "Student paper making"; "How to elaborate [answer keys]". Given the importance of assessment in the teaching-learning process, it is not surprising that teachers devote part of their time to it by discussing how tests and answer keys are to be designed as well as

the grading policy. Besides, lesson planning was often broached upon by some of the respondents: "setting pedagogical files"; "How to design and perform a lesson plan"; "How to plan a class"; "How to prepare a lesson plan"; "Lesson preparation"; "How to prepare classes". In these statements, emphasis is on the design and implementation of a lesson plan.

In addition to the mandatory weekly meetings, 81.48 percent of the respondents reported that they participate in other professional development activities. Those activities include area professional development workshops commonly called "*animation pédadgogique de zone*"; online courses and webinars organized by the American Cultural Center in Cotonou. Others also mentioned TEFL degree courses such as trainings for BAPES and CAPES, the two major teaching degrees awarded by the teacher training colleges in the country. In fact the area professional development workshops are organized from time to time by the teacher advisors or inspectors and gather many schools in one place to discuss pedagogical issues.

As far as teacher collaboration is concerned, 22 of the 54 respondents reported that they have observed a class taught by a colleague once to learn from him or her. Furthermore, only 22 respondents reported that they belong to a professional organization. Out of the 22, 4 indicated English clubs as their professional organization while 2 others did not mention any organization´s name. Obviously, these 3 are not members of any professional organization. Six mentioned that they belong respectively to BENTA, NATE, and BENTEA, only 4 spelled correctly the name of the only professional organization in the country, the Benin National Teachers of English Association (BNTEA). The 6 give the impression that they heard about BNTEA once and just want to show that they are part of an organization unless there are typos in their responses. Six others reported that they belonged to organizations that are not related to English language teaching. What all these imply is that very few respondents belong to or are active in a professional organization.

Further, most respondents do not seem to be aware of the importance of professional journals.

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Only 10 out of 54 respondents reported that they had subscribed to a professional journal. Out of the 10, 2 mentioned American Embassy as a journal, 1 mentioned VOA journal through e-mail and mentioned CAMVAS, and 2 did not mention any name of journal. Only 5 mentioned that they have subscribed to the *English Teaching Forum*. As is the case with professional organizations, very few teachers read professional journals. However, concerning the reflection on teaching practices by teachers, the picture is markedly different.

A large proportion of respondents (almost 63 percent) reported that they do take time to reflect on their teaching from time to time. Issues that focus their attention fall in two categories. The first category is the assessment of their own teaching to see if objectives have been reached: "Are my goals met"; "The way the lesson has taken place"; "whether the lesson has been well carried out"; "most of the time I ask myself whether my objectives are reached"; "The way that the lessons are conducted"; "The methodology and pedagogy." It appears from these accounts that the respondents are have a strong desire to teach EFL well because they appraise the implementation of their lesson plans bearing in mind the objectives they set for the lessons.

The second category, instructional improvement, is illustrated as follows: "I mostly realize what I did bad and how I will improve it"; "How to teach without using French while teaching English"; "How to better my way of teaching"; "the use of audiovisual or visual aids to help pupils or students to understand very well their English courses"; "How to respect the timing of the different skills"; "The way I teach grammar structure and how I can make my course more attractive"; "I often think about the strategies in order to transmit a maximum information to the learners within few minutes"; "How to improve things." These statements show that the respondents do reflect on their teaching deeply to the extent of identifying areas to improve for better performance.

Despite these good practices on the part of many respondents, professional development remains confronted with some challenges that are worth highlighting.

3.2 Challenges to Professional Development

In addition to some of the limitations identified so far, respondents pointed to others. Some mentioned lack of experienced teachers in the following terms: "lack of full time teachers to help the many inexperienced part-time teachers"; "No experienced teachers"; "The full time teachers do not come regularly to the workshop to share their knowledge". It is important to point out that being a full time teacher does not necessarily mean being experienced. On the other hand, younger teachers are aware that they can learn from more experienced ones but the latter are not always available.

Another important issue raised by the respondents is the lack of documentation and equipment: "Lack of adequate teaching materials"; "The most important difficulty is that we lack of documents related to the teaching of English"; "Problem of materials"; "Problem of materials: library, book"; "lack of documents related to teaching"; "Lack of documents, records, tapes for video projection". As it appears, some of the respondents have been specific about the type of documentation lacking, TEFL documents. Some mentioned overhead projectors that could be used to project videos on how to teach lessons or films to improve teachers´ subject matter knowledge.

Apart from lack of documentation, many respondents revealed lack of administrative support: "No administration support"; "Lack of encouragement"; "Lack of training"; "The part-time teachers are not paid for the meetings"; "There is no motivation from the staff of the school". In fact, participation in the weekly professional development meetings which last two hours is counted as teaching hours so that a certified teacher who is supposed to teach for 18 hours per week teaches 16 hours in the classroom and devotes the remaining two hours to the weekly meetings. A recent policy by the government is that part-time teachers are no longer going to enjoy that benefit. Therefore, they are not obliged to attend anymore. This might be the reasons why some respondents talk about lack of encouragement or motivation.

It is worth pointing out that one respondent made the following comments: "Most of the time,

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our AE are narrow-minded people. They are not creative". The AEs are teachers elected by their peers to lead the weekly meetings and coordinate activities related to the subject. They play a critical role and that is the reason why they are elected among senior teachers if available. if they are open-minded and creative, there is a lot that can be achieved every week in terms of experience sharing, document sharing and networking among the teachers in the same school.

In addition to sharing the challenges confronting their professional development, respondents made a lot of suggestions for addressing such challenges.

3.3 Ways of Improving Professional Development

The suggestions made by respondents can be classified in two big groups: suggestions that require action on the part of the teachers themselves and suggestions calling for action from higher authorities.

The suggestions that focus on the teachers themselves are very limited in numbers: "Teachers should be humble and read a lot"; "Sensitizing teachers to devote part of their time to research and avoid running after money"; "Participate actively to weekly professional development meetings". The respondents who made these comments are aware that the responsibility for professional development falls upon the teachers. The most important messages are reading, research and humility. If teachers are not humble, they cannot realize that they still have a lot to learn, and obviously there is no learning without reading and researching. It is also crucial for teachers to "avoid running after money". In fact, in order to make more money, teachers are tempted to teach in many schools with the accompanying workload in terms of lesson planning and paper grading. All these mean that there is hardly any time left for professional growth through reading and research.

From a different angle, most suggestions made by the respondents target the government. They focus on training, equipment and support provision.

Suggestions on training have been worded in different ways including: "The state will train the part-time teachers"; "Put emphasis on teachers´

training"; "Focus on training, especially on phonetics and phonology"; "Teachers should be [trained] not only in pedagogical matters but also to better improve their knowledge"; "Government should organize periodically teacher trainings". What transpires through these statements is that the training should cover both instructional procedures and subject matter knowledge such as phonetics and phonology as well they should be extended to part-time teachers. The latter are graduates of the English Department who have not received any professional training.

Suggestions related to equipment provision cover books and other equipment and some of them read as follows: "The government should send documents, books in the schools"; "Provide materials to teachers to make listening comprehension"; "Equip schools with sufficient English books"; "Well-written books"; "English laboratory"; "Provide teaching materials in quantity and quality in all our schools". In general, books are needed but "well-written" and "quality" books. This recommendation was certainly inspired by the poor quality of the textbooks of the first four grades of secondary school. Besides, the need for laboratory and audiovisual equipment cannot be overstated, especially for the teaching of listening comprehension and pronunciation as indicated in one of the suggestions.

It is good to have equipment but teachers also want to be motivated: "First and foremost, EFL teachers should be motivated to attend training"; "The authorities have to motivate the teachers by improving their life conditions"; "Providing teachers what they need"; "Teachers should be encouraged (those who do the job correctly)"; "Materials should be given to us to have more motivation to teach correctly". For these respondents, motivation is not just in terms of improving living conditions but also providing teaching materials and rewarding teachers who perform well, certainly to encourage others to follow suit.

There is another form of motivation that goes through the encouragement of supervision of teachers: "The government should motivate and encourage the accreditation officer, and educational advisors to pay visits to the EFL teachers". This

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respondent is referring to classroom observations by teacher advisors and inspectors. This is crucial because in Benin, such observations are carried out for development only. Neither the teacher advisors nor the inspectors can recommend firing a teacher. Now, what do all the above findings inspire?

4. Discussion of the Findings

The professional development practices in Benin are diversified. The staff meetings are the predominant form because they are mandatory for all teachers. In fact, such meetings facilitate peer knowledge sharing among teachers (Alimirzaee and Ashraf, 2016). Issues discussed by teachers during those meetings include instructional and classroom management concerns, learner assessment as well as lesson planning. Even though discussion of these issues may contribute to teachers´ growth, they lack an important component in that they focus on problem sharing and surely the quest for solutions. There is no mention of sharing of success stories. In fact, Ur (2012) suggested that teachers should also share their successful experiences to enable other teachers to replicate such experiences.

As far as collaboration is concerned, a sizeable percentage (40.74 percent) of respondents reported that at the beginning of their career, they were mentored by more experienced teachers. This high percentage is quite surprising in as much as to the best of my knowledge of the Benin educational system, mentorship as discussed earlier (Ur, 2012; Brown, 2007) is not a common practice in the Beninese secondary schools. This may be due to social desirability bias or to misunderstanding of the questionnaire item related to mentorship. In addition, very few respondents belong to professional organizations. It is certainly those who are members of a professional organization that have the opportunity to follow webinars and online courses. The largest majority of the respondents are not involved and for that reason, they cannot enjoy the numerous benefits associated with professional organizations such as leadership development, networking, development of the habit of reading, participation in the improvement of the EFL teaching profession (Gnawali, 2016; Crandall and Miller, 2014). If teachers are not members of professional associations, it follows that they have limited

information about professional journals. Rightly so, only a limited number of respondents reported to have subscribed to a professional journal. As a consequence, they cannot keep abreast of new developments and advances in the EFL field which keeps changing.

The fact that teachers do not have the opportunity to read professional journals poses a serious challenge to their professional development. But in addition to that, respondents mentioned other challenges. For example, some indicated that full-time teachers or experienced teachers do not attend the weekly meetings on a regular basis to share their experiences. The implication of this irregular attendance is lack of peer coaching. However, this comment is in contradiction with the fact that almost all the respondents reported that they attend the meetings regularly. In actual facts, full-time teachers do not seem to show much interest in the meetings. Lack of document is another impediment that compounds the lack of access to professional journals. It shows that teachers hardly have access to reading materials. As clearly indicated by Ur (2012), there is no substitute for reading in the professional life of EFL teachers, whether they are experienced or not. But documentation goes beyond books and other materials teachers can learn from. It also covers textbooks. Actually, the textbooks currently used from the first to the fourth grades of secondary schools are of poor quality. They are poorly illustrated, the distribution of the skills is not balanced, and most of the texts inside the textbooks are not authentic, to mention but a few problems (Iwikotan, 2013).

Furthermore, lack of administrative support has also been repeatedly mentioned by the respondents as one of the stumbling blocks to professional development. This comes in the form of lack of encouragement, lack of training and lack of motivation. No doubt that administrative support is pivotal in EFL teachers´ professional life because "schools where teachers receive meaningful feedback about their instructional practices and are recognized for their efforts will promote teachers improvement at faster rates than schools where such practices are absent" (Kraft and Papay, 2014, p.

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478). As it transpires through this idea, appropriate feedback and recognition of teachers´ merits motivate teachers and enable them to know what they are doing well or inappropriately, thus contributing to their development.

Suggestions have been made to overcome the aforementioned challenges. On the one hand, teachers are aware that they have a part to play in their development. Teachers are encouraged to realize that they are lifelong learners. As a consequence they should read and take an active part in the weekly professional development meetings. On the other, the government is to provide more training, teaching materials, and mainly to prize teachers who perform well. Even though this last recommendation may be difficult to implement at national level, schools can try to distinguish teachers who perform well, which will stimulate competition.

Training in subject matter and pedagogy also appears as a critical aspect of the recommendations. Yet, the respondents remained silent on the need to join a professional association, to subscribe to professional journals or participate in professional conferences. Through these channels, many of the challenges can be resolved. As mentioned by Crandall and Miller (2014), there is a wealth of information on the websites of professional organizations that teachers can tap into for their growth. Access to the internet may not be easy, especially in rural areas but I contend that there is a price teachers have to pay if they want to grow professionally.

5. Conclusion

We set out to investigate EFL teachers´ professional development practices and related challenges in selected secondary schools in Cotonou, Benin. Even though there are many challenges such as lack of teaching inputs and lack of administrative support, many professional development activities are performed in the schools. Such activities include a mandatory professional development weekly meeting, reflective teaching, and mentorship to mention but the prominent ones. To improve EFL teachers´ professional development, school administrators should be more supportive of teachers while the government is to provide more

focused training. Nonetheless, teachers should be sensitized on the centrality of professional organizations and journal in their development.

One of the limitations of the study is that it uses only self-reported data collected through a questionnaire. A more empirical approach that uses focus group discussions and analysis of the reports of the weekly meetings will certainly enable to have a deeper understanding of the issue of EFL teacher professional development in Benin.

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