# Context As A Shaper Of EFL Teacher Identity: Mediating Role Of Professional Development

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## Abstract

Generally, professional development initiatives focus mainly on enhancing teachers' classroom practices. However, teaching practices without being cognizant of students' culture and teaching contexts rarely have an impact on students' learning outcomes. With regard to language teaching, teachers' knowledge of teaching context is a pivotal factor in learners' language development. This paper reports on a study that explored how the Cambridge English Teacher (CET) professional development program influenced knowledge of teaching context of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers in a Saudi Arabian public university. Utilizing convergent parallel mixed-methods design, survey questionnaire and semi-structured interviews provide the data to explore the CET experiences of 130 EFL teachers. The combined quantitative and qualitative results show that because of the CET, the participants' knowledge of the Saudi EFL context was enhanced in the following areas: the status of the English language in Saudi society, learners' culture, adaptation to institutional policies, building rapport with learner, and learning from multicultural colleagues. Specifically, the findings indicated that EFL teachers from different linguistics backgrounds gained an understanding of how the English language is taught through using culturally sensitive methodologies. Finally, the article recommends steps that seek to help institutes provide context-specific PD to teachers as well as offers directions for current practices and future research.

## INTRODUCTION

The exponential growth of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) in Saudi Arabia and other Arabian Gulf states has foregrounded the role and development of teachers in a new line. Mere knowledge of teaching methods and materials is not enough for teachers in the face of unprecedented socio-cultural changes (Evans, 2019); rather knowledge of teaching context and students' culture is a prerequisite for effective teaching. This constitutes teacher identity which provides a framework for teachers to construct their own ideas of their self-image, their role, and their place in society (Sachs, 2005). Context is where the teacher works and is the site for the teacher identity construction (Pennington & Richards, 2016). Most in-service professional development (PD) programs do not have an explicit focus on EFL teachers' awareness of the culture where they teach and shape their identity. Against this backdrop, the current study seeks to evaluate the impact of the Cambridge English Teacher (CET) professional development on Saudi EFL teachers' knowledge of teaching context.

### The Cambridge English Teacher (CET) Professional Development

Due to the recent socio-economic changes in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, the English Language Institute (ELI) of King Abdulaziz University introduced the Cambridge English Teacher (CET) professional development program in the Kingdom. The CET aimed at enhancing EFL instructors' pedagogical knowledge as well as enabling their contextual knowledge. The CET professional development program was intended to make teachers aware of the challenges the institution is facing and of other educational reforms introduced by the Ministry of Higher Education. The researcher was privileged to be part of this PD program in all its phases.

The CET course was delivered in five phases: online modules on best classroom practices; group assignments; workshops; train-the-trainer (T-t-T) program for selected CET participants; and finally, cascading Cambridge trainers' roles to institutional trainers. The institutional trainers are the graduates of the Train-the-Trainer (T-T-T) program who are certified teacher trainers to train the ELI faculty members in a supportive environment. During this shift, Cambridge trainers offered feedback on workshop sessions delivered by the institutional trainers.

**Language Teacher Knowledge of Teaching Context**

Different contexts for teachers create different challenges that a teacher should understand to fully grasp the students and the teaching environment. Therefore, knowledge about teaching context and how it influences "the shaping of teacher identity" should be considered in teacher learning programs (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009, p.186). Language teachers' identity is always in flux and is shaped and reshaped according to the context in which he/she teaches (Flores & Day, 2006) and makes sense of self-making which is a multi-faceted and negotiated process. 'Multi-faceted' makes more sense for language teachers than for the teachers of other languages and other subjects owing to the complicated relationship among the learners, the teachers, and the language itself. Johnston (1997) believes that EFL teachers exist "in complex contexts in which personal, educational, political and socioeconomic discourses all influence the way the life is told" (p.708).

Language teacher's knowledge of the context is categorized into three interconnected levels: at the classroom level, at the institutional level, and at the level of general teaching culture (Richards & Farrell, 2011). A language teacher's knowledge of the context at the classroom level refers to the teacher's relationship with students and his teaching methodologies/philosophies. The teacher's relationship with the students is indicative of the learners' degree of comfort with the teacher's style, demeanor, and personality. In the Saudi EFL context authors (Alrashidi & Phan 2015) have indicated that students' lack of

motivation is among the factors that hinder students learning and have complained that professional learning hardly addresses this problem. Though they did not hesitate to hold the teachers responsible for the milieu, they indicated the absence of structures that help teachers in overcoming this obstacle. As for the teaching methodology, it is not only the product of students' culture and social demands (Sulaimani & Elyas, 2015), but also a reflection of global teaching standards; therefore, it is demanded of a successful language teacher that his methodology should be "of both global appropriacy and local appropriation" (Kramsch & Sullivan, 1996, p.199).

The second level of a teacher's knowledge of teaching context is at the institutional level whereby he/she values and benefits from the collegial relationships and gets in harmony with the written and unwritten intuitional policies. Teachers' awareness of institutional policies and expectations are among those elements that redefine a teacher's classroom practices and professional identity (Garton & Richards, 2008). In line with this discussion, Dejaeghere and Cao (2009) suggested that teachers acquire intercultural competence as well as cultural knowledge through the professional development they engage in.

The third level of EFL teachers' contextual knowledge is getting to know the society in which the learning happens as well as the general attitude towards English language learning. For instance, due to the prevailing conservative ideologies in Saudi Arabia, EFL teacher professional identity development is problematic, since "the growing contradictions between societal practices and religious doctrine" (Jamjoom, 2010, p.56) in Saudi Arabia renders English language teaching enigmatic. Alrahaili (2018) also contended that EFL teaching becomes challenging in Saudi Arabia where there exist mixed feelings of love and hate towards English language and English language teaching. EFL Teacher identity becomes more complicated when they teach a language that is viewed negatively in a society as described by Elyas and Picard (2018). They state that different sectors of the society dubbed it a language of infidels and a symbol of oppression and colonialism.

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Therefore, Ebtehal (2017) suggests that Saudi EFL teachers yearned for better teacher training to cope with emerging learners' needs and society's expectations.

**Related Studies in the Literature**

The context-driven and context-specific EFL teacher professional learning is essential for teachers' knowledge and understanding of instructional contexts and learners' academic achievements. Regarding the three dimensions of context awareness in relation to language teaching (Richards & Farrell, 2011), different teacher-learning contexts respond differently to teacher learning. To relate the concept of teacher learning about teaching context in the present study, the following binaries explain how modes of professional development enhance teacher understanding of the context and culture and, hence, teacher professional identity: pre-service vs. in-service; interventions vs. no interventions; teacher learning in Western vs in non-Western settings; multi-cultural learners vs monocultural learners.

  Professional development initiatives focus on pre-service EFL teachers who are yet to start teaching and in-service teachers who already have developed a professional identity in a context. In both cases beyond content-focused PD prepares teachers to deal with context-focused educational undertakings. In the former case, EFL teachers learning about teaching contexts is general without having any knowledge of culturally relevant pedagogy (Chan, 2014; Gutiérrez et al., 2019; Romjin et al., 2021). Learning in these teacher training programs develops the theoretical dimensions of culture and teaching but does not lead to teachers' acquisition of skills and knowledge to be implemented in pedagogical practices (Parkhouse et al., 2019; Pishghadam et al., 2021). Learning in practicum leads to a prescribed understanding of a context rather than the real contextualized classroom ecology (Sato & Mutoh, 2022). In the latter case, contextual manifestations of teacher learning are evidenced by their nuanced understanding of the context wherein teachers negotiate their professional identity (Lucas et al., 2018). Professional development in the context of in-service learning is based

on the knowledge of the teaching culture and the learners' learning styles and preferences (McChesney et al., 2019). Moreover, recent policy and research have evinced that reconstruction of teacher beliefs is necessary for a change in practice; however, in pre-service training, teachers' beliefs are not fully defined and hence are not readily available for change. This claim was also confirmed by Civitillo et al. (2018) who suggested that the site for teachers' belief change is in-service PD rather than pre-service training.

Learning about teaching context also happens in continuous professional development activities without any intervention and in PD sessions designed for developing teacher learning. Teacher knowledge of the general culture, institutional environment, and classroom ecology is developed through informal collaborative discussions (Sancar et al., 2021), action research (Sato & Mutoh, 2022), self-directed learning (Cirocki & Farrell, 2019), and reflection (Romijn et al., 2019). Although research indicates that teachers gain contextual understanding through school-based continuous learning, due to the complex and ever-changing nature of EFL teaching, PD sessions are required to focus on equipping teachers with social and cultural tools that could help in delivering culturally sensitive classroom instructions (Khan et al., 2020; Sancar et al., 2021).

Although teaching is contextually situated wherein institutions encourage customized PD opportunities for teachers, top-down and bottom-up teacher learning always impact how teachers negotiate their teaching contexts. In this regard, Al-Balushi (2022) found that centralized top-down PD had a negative impact on teachers' learning and classroom practices. Al-Balushi explained that in the Omani context, EFL teachers believed that PD is a conduit for a change in their beliefs; however, this outcome is rarely expected from prescribed learning experiences. To support this notion further, other studies conducted in Saudi Arabia (Alshaikhi, 2020; Alsalahi, 2015) urge for more democratic teacher professionalism as opposed to the prescribed institutional teacher learning.

Teaching contexts also determine the considerations for professional development and its readiness to change teachers' beliefs and knowledge of the teaching context and students' culture. In this respect, studies conducted on EFL teaching in the Asian context and ESL teaching in Western cultures have different implications for teachers' learning programs. EFL teaching occurs in cultures where English is not used as a day-to-day language but as a formal language of academic instruction. To deliver culturally appropriate teaching, methods and materials are cognizant of the home culture and the cultures presented in the textbooks (Pishghadam et al., 2021). The same idea is echoed by Cook (2010) who examined the impact of a Canadian in-service education and training program on Japanese schoolteachers' English teaching practices. The findings revealed that participants felt handicapped in the implementation of communicative language teaching tenets. Furthermore, in Asian and Middle Eastern EFL contexts, teachers from diverse backgrounds teach monocultural students; whereas in Western ESL contexts, the students are largely from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds taught by teachers from native English-speaking teachers. PD programs for the enhancement of teachers' knowledge of students' culture in the ESL contexts (Johnson & Wallington, 2021) develop a teacher's knowledge of not one context but of many based on the students' demographics. On the other hand, PD programs in the EFL contexts such as Middle East (Alshaikhi, 2020; Assalahi, 2016; Hassani et al., 2019; Pishghadam et al., 2021), Europe (Maijala, 2018), Far-East (Cirocki & Farrell, 2019; Santoso, 2020; Sato & Mutoh, 2022), and South America (Castro de la Hoz, 2019; Cuartas Álvarez, 2020) develop EFL teachers' cultural understanding of monocultural local students.

Now that the literature on teacher learning of teaching context in relation to PD programs has been elaborated upon, it is time to point out that identity formation and development of teachers cannot be substantiated without the contexts in which they shape their experiences whether they are social or professional. Therefore, professional development activities, specifically in-service formal

programs are mindful of educating teachers in general and EFL teachers about their current teaching context. After reviewing the extant literature on the subject in different contexts, it is revealed that in the Saudi EFL context, the influence of in-service PD on EFL teachers' knowledge of the teaching context has not been studied yet. Therefore, the current study will fill in the gap and explore the impact of the Cambridge English Teacher (CET) professional development program on the knowledge of the teaching context of Saudi EFL teachers. The current research will answer the following research question:

How has an in-service professional development program enhanced the Saudi EFL teachers' knowledge of the teaching context?

## METHODOLOGY

### Participants and setting

The participants in this study are EFL instructors who teach tertiary students at the English Language Institute (ELI) of King Abdulaziz University Jeddah. The participants took part in the Cambridge English Teacher (CET) which was a one-year mandatory professional development program. All participants were from the male campus due to the gender separation policy at all Saudi higher education institutes. Since the current study utilized a convergent parallel design (Creswell & Creswell, 2018), convenience sampling was used for quantitative data collection; that is all the CET participants who participated in the CET were invited to complete the quantitative questionnaire. While purposive sampling was employed for qualitative data collection (Cohen, et al., 2018). For collecting detailed data, information-rich cases were chosen (Patton, 2002). In this paper, I followed the methods of Ahmad and Shah (2022).

  As shown in Table 1, out of 120 participants who participated in the quantitative questionnaire, 24 had bachelor's degrees, 77 had master's degrees, and 19 had PhD qualifications. Regarding their EFL qualification, 39 had a Certificate of English Language Teaching to Adults (CELTA) or Diploma of English Language Teaching to Adults (DELTA)

or both, 59 had Master of Arts or Bachelor of Arts in TESOL/Applied Linguistics, and 22 participants had Master of Arts in English Language and Literature. As for the participants' EFL teaching experience, 12 participants had over 25 years, 39 had 16-25 years, 49 had 10-15 years, 19 had 5-9 years, and had 3-4 years of English teaching experience. Regarding their linguistic background, 25 were native English-speaking teachers, 42 were non-native Arabic-speaking teachers, and 53 were non-native non-Arabic speaking teachers. From the 120 participants who took part in the quantitative phase, 15 were selected for semi-structured interviews.

**Table 1**:  **Demographic information of participants**

| Sampling Characteristics | Categories | Percentage | Number | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Highest Academic Qualification | Bachelor | 20.8% | 25 | |
| | Master | 63.3% | 76 | |
| | PhD | 15.8% | 19 | 120 |
| EFL Qualification | CELTA/DELTA | 32.5% | 39 | |
| | MA/BA TESOL | 49.2% | 59 | |
| | MA English | 18.3% | 22 | 120 |
| EFL Experience | 3-4 years | 0.8% | 1 | |
| | 5-9 years | 15.8% | 19 | |
| | 10-15 years | 40.8% | 49 | |
| | 16-25 years | 32.5% | 39 | |
| | > 25 years | 10.0% | 12 | 120 |
| Linguistic Background | Native Speakers | 20.8% | 25 | |
| | Non-Native Arabic Speakers | 35.0% | 42 | |
| | Non-Native Non-Arabic Speakers | 44.2% | 53 | 120 |

## 1.1.  Assessments and measures

For the quantitative data collection, a retrospective 5-items on a 5-point Likert scale (from 1=strongly disagree to 5= strongly agree), Teacher Knowledge of Context Questionnaire (TKCQ) was designed based on the notion of language teacher knowledge of context at three levels: classroom level, at institution level, and at the level of general teaching culture (Richards & Farrell, 2011). To determine the face validity of TKCQ, a panel of six experts

with extensive teaching and research experience in the field reviewed the TKCQ items for possible errors (Olsen, 2011). Their feedback helped in modifying the questionnaire. Next, Lawshe's content validity ratio (CVR) (Wilson, et al., 2012) and content validity index (CVI) (Devon et al., 2007) were calculated to measure the content validity of the questionnaire. A panel of five experts rated the questionnaire items as 'Not essential', 'Not that essential', and 'Essential'.  After collecting the responses of each panelist, 'Essential' preferences for each item were determined. Items with a CVR of 0.78 or higher were deemed to have content validity (Polit et al., 2007), while items below this threshold were removed. After removing two items with less than 0.78 CVR, the final TKCQ had five items. Then, CVI was measured which was 0.80. Finally, the reliability of the TKCQ was measured using Cronbach α. The internal consistency of the TKCQ was .899 (pre) and .879 (post). This measure shows that the questionnaire had a high internal consistency (Onwuegbuzie et al., 2000).

  With regard to the qualitative strand, data was collected through semi-structured interviews. The interview guide was designed based on key themes that emerged from literature with the research question as a guide. The interview questions corresponded to the quantitative questionnaire (TKCQ) to use parallel constructs in both strands (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).  The qualitative data's trustworthiness (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) was established according to the criteria for trustworthiness which included credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability of the qualitative data.

**Data Collection Procedure**

The current study employed a convergent parallel design of mixed methods to answer the research question. Quantitative and qualitative data collection and analysis were conducted concurrently. First, for piloting the quantitative questionnaire, 30 CET participants were recruited to see that "the items are relevant, important, and suitable for the respondents" (Onwuegbuzie et al., 2007, p.118). Then, the questionnaire was modified in light of the participants' feedback. After the pilot testing, 180 EFL

instructors who participated in the CET were sent the TKCQ. 120 responses were received via a retrospective pre-test/post-test questionnaire. (Russ-Eft & Preskill, 2009). Through using this methodology, the pre and post-ratings were collected simultaneously, with pre-score retrospectively. Concurrently, the semi-structured interviews were conducted.

**Data Analysis**

To analyze TSEQ, descriptive and inferential statistics were used. Inferential statistics yielded means, percentages, and frequencies of the participants' responses. Whereas inferential statistics were used to determine whether the changes in the pre and post-measures were statistically significant. First, the Kolmogorov-Smirnov (K-S) Test was employed to test if the data meets the normality assumptions. Then a non-parametric equivalent for the dependent sample t-test (Wilcoxon Signed-Rank Test) was used to determine whether the pre-test and post-test responses were statistically different. With regard to the quantitative data analysis, the interviews were transcribed verbatim, and the transcripts of the interviews were sent to the participants for their feedback. The transcribed scripts were analyzed in MAXQDA using deductive and inductive lenses. Initially, the coding process yielded 10 codes which were merged and grouped together into five themes. For confidentiality purposes, the participants' names were kept anonymous while their pseudonyms were used in the analysis.

**RESULTS & DISCUSSION**
In this section, results from the quantitative data are presented. Then, the combined results of the quantitative and qualitative data are discussed.

**Results of the Quantitative Data**
First means, standard deviations, and frequencies of individual items on TKCQ are presented. Next, the results of the normality test are given. Finally, Wilcoxon Signed Rank test results are given.

**Table 2: Means and standard deviation of the five attributes: PRE and POST**

| Knowledge of Teaching Context (KTC) | N | PRE | | POST | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | Mean | Std. Deviation | Mean | Std. Deviation |
| | 120 | 4.0117 | .86006 | 4.3233 | .77359 |

As can be seen in Table 2, the mean scores of the pretest are greater than the mean scores of the posttest, which indicates that EFL teacher knowledge of teaching context enhanced after the CET program.

**Table 3: Frequencies of individual items in the teaching context**

| TPIQ Items | PRE | | | | | POST | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | SD% | D% | N% | A% | SA% | SD% | D% | N% | A% | SA% |
| 1 | 0.8 | 9.2 | 18.3 | 37.5 | 34.2 | 0.8 | 5.0 | 7.5 | 32.5 | 54.2 |
| 2 | 3.3 | 8.3 | 22.5 | 41.7 | 24.2 | 2.5 | 5.8 | 13.3 | 32.5 | 45.8 |
| 3 | 1.7 | 6.7 | 10.8 | 20.8 | 60.0 | 1.7 | 3.3 | 9.2 | 16.7 | 69.2 |
| 4 | 3.3 | 5.8 | 12.5 | 32.5 | 45.8 | 3.3 | 2.5 | 7.5 | 30.8 | 55.8 |
| 5 | 2.5 | 8.3 | 14.2 | 43.3 | 31.7 | 2.5 | 2.5 | 8.3 | 33.3 | 53.3 |

SD=Strongly Disagree, D= Disagree, N= Neutral, A= Agree, SA= Strongly Agree

As indicated in Table 3, in response to the TKCQ item 1: I know how the English language is perceived in Saudi Arabian society, an 11.6 % increase in combined agreeing and strongly agreeing responses resulted. In response to the TKCQ item 2: I am aware of my learners' cultural sensitivities, an 8.3 % increase in combined agreeing and strongly agreeing responses. In response to the TKCQ item 3: I can adapt to new policy changes at the ELI, a 15% increase in combined agreeing and strongly agreeing responses resulted. In response to the TKCQ item 4: I can develop good rapport with my learners 5.1 % increase in agreeing and strongly agreeing responses resulted. In response to the TKCQ item 5: I learn from my colleagues who come from diverse cultural and academic backgrounds, that a 12.4% increase in combined agreeing and strongly

agreeing responses resulted. Thus, all five post-scores are higher than the pre-scores.

**Table 4: Normality test for the PRE and POST measures**

|  | N | PRE | | POST | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Construct |  | K-S Z | Sig. (2-tailed) | K-S Z | Sig. (2-tailed) |
| Teaching context | 120 | 2.314 | .000 | 2.091 | .000 |

As can be seen in Table 4, the p-vale is less than 0.05 which denotes that data violated the assumption of normality. There is not enough evidence to suggest that no change occurred between the pre and post-scores. Therefore, to compare the differences between the pre and post-score, a non-parametric test was justified.

**Table 5: Results of the Wilcoxon Signed-Rank Test**

|  | Ranks | Mean Ranks | Sum of Ranks | Z | Sig. (2-tailed) |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Negative | 4 | 30.50 | 122.00 |  |  |
| Positive | 42 | 22.83 | 959.00 | -4.895 | .000 |
| Ties | 74 |  |  |  |  |
| Total | 120 |  |  |  |  |

As indicated in Table 5, the Wilcoxon Signed-Rank Test results showed that post-test ranks are significantly higher than pre-test ranks (Z= -4.895, p < .000). Hence, EFL teachers' knowledge of teaching context was significantly improved because of the CET.

**Discussion of the Combined Quantitative and Qualitative data**

This section discusses the impact of the CET on EFL teachers' knowledge of the teaching context. The areas of teachers' knowledge of context in relation to professional development investigated in the current study are (a) their improved understanding of the role English is playing in Saudi society, (b) knowing about the learners' cultural values and sensitivities, (c) adapting to the institutional policy changes, (d) building good rapport with learners, and (d) gaining academically from multicultural teaching faculty.

**English in KSA**

In response to TKCQ item: I know how the English language is perceived in Saudi Arabian society, an 11.6 % increase on the five-point Likert scale was shown in agreeing and strongly agreeing responses indicating a majority of the questionnaire participants became more aware and enlightened regarding how English is perceived in this culture and what role it is playing in the society after taking part in the CET. Almost two-thirds of the interview participants (68%) elaborated that the post-CET period is marked by an enhanced understanding of the English language. From this standpoint, the CET participants have a different outlook of teaching English in this EFL context.

Through the CET prism, students' perceptions and the general society's attitude toward learning English in the past, present, and future were also highlighted by participants of the current study. One of the key findings is that due to strong religious and conservative ideologies prevailing in the society English language was viewed with skepticism. Nelson stated that "English was viewed from the point of skepticism because the language was forced upon the people", however, the CET courses were a window of opportunity through which we could see that "everybody realized that English is a vehicle for upward mobility within the workplace, further education and obviously for the social interaction". Another interviewee, Deedat, contended that traditionally English language in Saudi Arabia was considered the language of "infidels and crusaders" and after the recent socio-economic changes, the teachers felt a need to confront this negative attitude. Luckily, the CET told us how "to mitigate this feeling in the students" as well as in the larger society. This finding supports a bold claim made by Elyas and Picard (2018) who believe that Saudi society has a hostile attitude towards the English language due to religious and imperial strings attached to it.

This finding regarding the participants' view on English teaching in the Saudi EFL context fills the gap identified by Ebtehal (2017). As participants in her study were only Saudi

teachers, she recommended that the views of various teacher groups should be investigated. The current study expands the scope of this inquiry to teachers hailing from various nationalities. The difference between Ebtehal's and the current study, however, is that her main focus was on the Ministry of Interior led institutions while the current study focused on the Saudi higher education context. Moreover, the current study also beeped into the role of English in actualizing the government initiatives seeking to put the country on a global track.

  The data yielded by the current study provide convincing evidence that through CET the faculty members knew the place of English in the Saudi Vision 2030, and how to help in its actualization. Sattar states:

Saudi Arabia is moving in a new direction, and they want to have a place in the world. They are moving in a new direction through Vision 2030. And in terms of language, I would say that there is a language barrier. And the society is moving in the right direction and English is the key for such development. And to realize that vision they are working in many directions, such as offering CET professional development courses to the faculty.

One of the key themes of Vision 2030 is to have a thriving economy, an ambitious notion that demands a different EFL educational focus (Picard, 2018). The current study's exploration of the teachers' readiness to take on the challenge of different EFL educational focus provides a take-off point for future teaching initiatives, further research, and teacher professional development in the Kingdom.

**Students' Culture**

In response to the TKCQ item 2: I am aware of my learners' cultural sensitivities, an 8.3 % increase on the five-point Likert scale was shown in agreeing and strongly agreeing responses indicating the CET has helped them learn about the culture and context where they teach. It indicates that professional development is not a monolithic phenomenon that offers a collection of skills but rather presents a broader

social learning experience. The respondents indicated that teachers' knowledge of the learners' culture and cultural sensitivity was significantly improved as a result of the CET PD.

It is worth discussing that the current study found a response to the lamentable state of English teaching and learning in Saudi Arabia. The available evidence seems to suggest that teachers whether they are novices or experienced fail to deliver according to the learners' needs due to their lack of contextual knowledge, as the majority of the participants indicate that their classroom performance significantly improved after they were exposed to the cultural elements in the CET. Tamer states:

First of all, being an Arab I know the mindset of the students here. Whenever I am in professional development this knowledge comes to the fore and in turn, my students benefit from this. What I learned from the CET is that in different classrooms in different situations, you have to tailor your attitude according to your classroom practices. More importantly, you have to modify your attitude according to the needs of the students because you are not going to give them a dish that is indigestible for them.

This finding filled a gap identified by Al-Asmari (2016) and Khan (2011) who found that EFL teachers' professional development failed to help participants understand teaching culture in the KSA. The result of the current study found that the CET sought to enlighten teaching faculty about Saudi culture. It is also a fulfillment of Alrahaili's wish (2019) who enunciated that "it is important to understand the Saudi community's social and cultural context" (p.87). Dawood put forward the view that CET courses provided a platform for non-Muslim teachers, especially American and European teachers, to know about Saudi socio-cultural norms.

As far as the CET's role is concerned in this regard it has helped a lot to widen the teachers' knowledge of the students' culture. For example, some new teachers had no

idea what the Saudi culture is and what students think especially since some of the teachers are non-Muslims, who are native speakers, and they know very little about the religion. So that's why it was important for them to know about the Saudi culture and CET courses were a very good platform for this purpose.

His view rests on the assumption that in an ultraconservative Saudi society understanding cultural and religious values are prerequisite for successful teaching. This finding adds an important element to the conclusion arrived at by Althobaiti (2012) and Barnawi (2010) who demonstrated that the commonly prevailing teaching methods may not be in accord with learners' expectations and learning styles. Rather, they proposed that dedicated contextual professional development can lead to marked teacher performance and student learning. The current study is a response to the growing demand in the literature identifying the contextual elements in an in-service professional development program and in providing a PD that offers "the balance between providing specific knowledge about students' cultures and guarding against promoting stereotypes or broad generalizations" (Parkhouse et al., 2019).

**Adaptations to Institutional Policies**

The current study also looked into the issue of teachers' adaptability to new policy changes and institutional reforms after going through a rigorous professional development program that was based on contextual needs. In response to the TKCQ item 3: I can adapt to new policy changes at the ELI, a 15% increase on a five-point Likert scale was shown in agreeing and strongly agreeing responses. The interview respondents corroborated this finding and indicated that teachers' compliance with institutional rules and policies was characterized by following strictly the pacing guide and instructional pack, preparing lesson plans as directed, and abiding by the revamped observation guidelines. Amer cites an instance:

Before the CET course, everybody was expected to follow the teacher's pack, but nobody did that. Because they were

not aware of the rationale and logic behind using the teachers' pack but now after the CET course, they are aware of the significance and the value of the teachers' pack, so they are using it now not by force but by choice.

As indicated, an effective professional development framework includes and advocates the above-mentioned areas to streamline and standardize teaching practices in a particular institute. The findings of the current study are consistent with the views of Pennington and Richards (2016), who stated that teachers' identities are in constant flux and are never stable and experience stress when teachers find themselves between attempting to adapt syllabus constraints and endearing their teaching ideals. However, this conflict "offers opportunities for identity negotiation in response to context. Such adjustments are in fact the normal case" (Pennington & Richards, 2016, p.9). This finding corroborates the notions that cultural and cross-cultural knowledge of the teaching context redraw teachers' beliefs about their students (Al Balushi, 2020; Cuartas Álvarez, 2020).

In the current study we found out that if professional development in the climate of educational reforms is mindful of convincing teachers of the changes, the goal of having teachers follow the changes becomes easier.

**Rapport with Learners**
One of the main findings of the current study was the improved teacher-student relationship after the CET. In response to the TKCQ item 4: I can develop a good rapport with my learners" a 5.1 % increase on a five-point Likert scale was shown in agreeing and strongly agreeing responses indicating that those surveyed had better rapport building expertise with the learners after passing through the rigorous professional training in CET. Those interviewed expounded that they learnt how to have cordial relationships in the classroom through utilizing different techniques, such as designing student-centered activities, fostering students' confidence, and motivating learners.

The previous research in the Saudi EFL context, for example, Alrashidi and Phan (2015), is evidence of the fact that while lack of learners' motivation to learn the English language is among the issues that teachers face in the classroom; however, there has hardly been any attempt to identify ways to address this problem. Admittedly, the participants of the current studies were unable to establish good relationships with students until they knew through the CET how to bridge the communication gap with and among students through encouragement and support. This finding supports the conclusion reached by Alrabai and Moskovsky (2016) and Pishghadam et al. (2021) who found that feelings of anxiety, learners' reluctance to participate, their unwillingness to respond to teacher's questions, and their exorbitant dependence on their teacher contribute to their low achievements.

The current study also revealed that participants of CET were able to motivate students by applying and designing activities that suit students' learning preferences and styles. The same idea was echoed by Haqqan:

After the CET, I feel much more relaxed and stable with my students now. I remember that the CET had a workshop on the icebreakers and in the last module I tried those icebreakers with my students in the class which was so interesting. Seriously, I would start with the textbook on the first day and this would not give me enough opportunity to develop a good rapport with my students but after your workshops, I can develop a very good rapport with my students.

This substantiates the assertion made by Al-Khairy (2013) who pointed out the existence of inappropriate teaching methods in Saudi EFL classes that are responsible for students' low motivational intensity. In addition to motivational strategies, interview participants mentioned that student-teacher confidence-building measures were another expertise bestowed by CET to ELI faculty members. The current study found that lack of trust between teachers and students is one of the hindrances in the way of building good rapport; nevertheless, luckily the ELI faculty members

have overcome this obstacle after taking part in CET by creating positive social interaction in the classroom.

The findings of the current study are concurrent with Chan's (2014) finding which shows that teacher learning enhances participants' knowledge of the context through building rapport with students as well as with teachers. However, the current study contradicts her findings at times. She reported that due to a lack of support from the administration, some teachers experienced that their identity was negatively impacted, whereas, in the current study, no teacher had negative identity development experiences. One reason for the teachers' negative perceptions of the PD in Chan's study could be the participants' lack of adequate teaching experience, who were novice teachers and new to the context where the study was conducted, while the CET participants had many years of ELT experience.

**Learning from Multicultural Faculty**
Saudi EFL context stands out from other English teaching contexts owing to hosting faculty members hailing from across various socio-cultural, linguistics, and ethnic backgrounds; yet they have mono-cultural and mono-lingual Saudi learners. The unique teaching environment wherein teachers are from across borders and varied pedagogical spaces presents not only a diverse and comprehensive range of teaching options but also an opportunity for the teachers to redevelop a global teacher professional identity in the Saudi EFL context (Burke, 2019).

In response to the TKCQ item 5: I learn from my colleagues who come from diverse cultural and academic backgrounds, a 12.4 % increase on the five-point Likert scale was shown in agreeing and strongly agreeing responses. The interview data revealed that teachers improved their teaching repertoire, techniques, and methods by virtue of their collaboration with colleagues who had not only teaching experience in their perspective countries but had also expertise in working in various overseas EFL destinations. Among the acquired competencies from this getting together, as participants mentioned, are teaching methods,

professional development curves, and multiple ways to co-exist. This result ties well with Dejaeghere and Cao's (2009) findings which ascertain that school-based professional development leads to teachers' intercultural competence through developing ethno-relative worldview. Regarding teachers' multiculturalism, this study and the current study converge on a single point that institutionally approved professional development supports teacher learning. However, the professional development that the current study considers covers a wide range of teacher development aspects including the multiculturalist view, whereas the above-mentioned research studies the impact of professional development programs that only focus on the intercultural competence of teachers in the US K-12 system.

The ELI faculty members belong to three linguistic backgrounds: native teachers, non-native Arab teachers, and non-native non-Arab teachers (Ahmad, 2016). The interview respondents revealed that among the aforementioned teacher groups from three distinct linguistic backgrounds, the native and non-native teachers benefited significantly from the non-native Arab teachers. Smith elaborated:

Having an Asian background, the first thing that I learnt from the Arab teachers during the CET was the way they teach. It gives us certain cultural awareness because these people have kind of relationships with our students…In the culture that we belong to the teacher has always been a highly respected position while here in Saudi Arabia it comes to almost equality. And sometimes the student is more important than the teacher. Again, about the phonological aspects of teaching, we realized that after such a long education and experience the first language (L1) influence is still there in the [students'] language learning.

Belonging to the students' culture and being aware of their language learning difficulties, Arab teachers during the CET were able to present teaching methods and approaches in a local way. In line with the findings of Alghofaili and Elyas (2017), the current study established that bilingual teachers, particularly Arab teachers, are in a better position to teach

EFL students in Saudi Arabia due to their ability to negotiate sometimes conflicting identities. However, the findings of the current study prove contrary to what Alghofaili and Elyas (2017) said that local teachers have better L2 competency as compared to native teachers. As all three groups of teachers benefitted from each other's experiences, the current study also explored that non-Arab, non-native teachers gain significantly from native teachers. Nevertheless, learning from Arab teachers was a prominent theme that emerged in the current study. The current study supported the conclusion of Chen et al. (2016) who discovered that teachers from various linguistic and socio-cultural backgrounds benefit from each other's varied teaching experiences. The participants of the current study, however, indicated that learning from Arab teachers was more prominent as compared to learning from other teacher groups. Thus, it adds to Kachru's (1985) three circles premise and explores that teachers from the inner and outer circles learn from teachers hailing from expanding circles in terms of local students' needs and local teaching context. This finding also points toward including knowledge of geographic location in English Language teacher certification (Johnson & Wallington, 2021).

**CONCLUSION**

The current study revealed how through in-service PD Saudi EFL teachers became aware of the socio-cultural context as well as of the classroom ecology where they teach and reconstruct their professional identity. For the first time, the current study investigated an in-service professional development program that led participants to a better understanding of the role the English language is playing in modern Saudi Arabian society. The realization that the English language is going to take up new social challenges made the teachers more knowledgeable and more motivated to mitigate ambivalent feelings in students and the general public towards the English Language and, hence, to steer their teaching beliefs and practices to achieve that goal. Additionally, the data in the current study revealed the CET reshaped teachers' previously held teaching beliefs and contextualized their teaching practices which were

previously in contradiction to the local cultural norms. Furthermore, when institutional reforms were implemented, teachers felt more in sync with institutional changed policies after participating in the CET. In this regard, after the CET journey teachers saw more value in adhering to institutional pacing guide, classroom observational scheme, prescribed teacher guide, and lesson planning as compared to the pre-CET era which was marked by teachers' disbelief towards the practices. It was also found out that the CET trained the participants in establishing good rapport with students which is a hallmark of students' motivation and successful classroom engagement. Although during and after the CET teachers coming from different linguistic backgrounds gained pedagogical knowledge from each other, being privileged to share the learners' language and being aware of the local culture, Arab teachers' experiences shared proved beneficial for the non-Arab teachers who had no or little knowledge of the local context and learners' learning needs and preferences.

The findings of the current study have significant implications for PD providers and institutes. The PD providers should ensure that EFL/ESL in-service professional development has a specific focus on developing teacher knowledge of teaching context because language teaching without considering the socio-cultural environment of the learners alienates students from knowing how language functions in each society. To achieve this goal, PD programs should consider teachers' diverse linguistic backgrounds as a strength rather than a hindrance. Among the diverse teachers, those who share the students' L1 can educate other teachers in culturally sensitive classroom practices. Nevertheless, the findings of the current study should be interpreted considering some limitations. Due to the gender segregation policy in Saudi higher education, the current study employed teachers from the male campus only; therefore, the scope of the study could have been widened by recruiting female counterparts as well. Another limitation is that the data was gathered via teachers' self-reports. Self-reports do reflect participants' real experiences and beliefs; however, completeness of understanding is sometimes compromised (Pualhus & Vazire, 2007). There is a need for

research studies in other Saudi and regional universities that have in-service EFL teacher professional development programs. Longitudinal case studies employing larger and more diverse sample sizes can offer a nuanced understanding of the complex phenomenon of English language teaching in a specific socio-cultural environment.

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