

EFL University Teachers' Professional Development through a Research-Oriented Training Program

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Abstract

University teachers need to develop themselves academically and professionally, as they have to be always aware of the updated teaching methods. Moreover, universities play a great role in creating the suitable environment to encourage teachers. This quantitative and qualitative study examines the influence of attending a research-oriented program prepared by the Research Unit at the English Language Institute. A total of forty female English language teachers teaching students in the preparatory year participated in this training program. Interested participants who applied to join were given an eight-week training program. The materials were uploaded online weekly; followed by an online participation in a discussion board. The program also included weekly face-to-face meetings in addition to a number of workshops. The study data was collected using a questionnaire that includes multiple-choice and open-ended questions in order to identify the opinions of teachers about the training program. According to the research results, the teachers who attended the program had learned about how to conduct a research. They stated the importance of such a program in developing their skills as researchers as well as their teaching skills.

Keywords: Teacher education - Teacher practice - Professional development – Scientific research

1. Introduction

The world we live in today requires highly dynamic individuals or professionals with the capacity to provide solutions to emerging issues in the society. Universities as the highest level of education should have the capacity to release professionals who can critically and objectively analyze a situation or issue, generate knowledge and offer innovative solutions or alternatives (Demetrian, 2009). Development of scientific research skills and positive attitude among university studies emerges as one of the best ways through which universities can ensure that they produce individual professionals with the capacity to provide new solutions and knowledge in a fast-changing world (Thiry, Laursen & Hunter, 2008). However, this is only possible if university teachers have adequate scientific research skills and appropriate behavior and attitude towards research practice (McCoy, 2008). Therefore, universities should create an environment that supports scientific research skills development among university teachers as well as among the scholars.

Research has demonstrated continuous professional development for university teachers as an effective strategy for ensuring that university teachers have the necessary teaching skills and competency to improve not only students' performance but also their ability to critically think, generate new knowledge and innovations (Zulijan & Vogrinc, 2010). Despite the need for teachers to continuously enhance their teaching skills and align their teaching strategies with emerging needs, they face significant challenges in doing so. Such challenges include lack of effective professional development strategies, busy teaching schedules, and inadequate research skills.

University teachers can only come up with new teaching strategies if they have adequate scientific research skills to analyze current teaching strategies, identify issues or problems and provide alternative improved strategies (Rosenshine, 2012). To address the problem of inadequate scientific research skills, knowledge, and promote a positive attitude among university teachers, universities provide professional development opportunities including training programs, workshops, and conferences that support scientific research practice (Aliyeva, Flanagan, Johnson, & Strelow, 2016).

1.1. Objectives of the Study

This study sought to establish the relevance of a research-oriented training program to EFL teachers' growth and development. The study further sought to determine whether a research-oriented training positively affects EFL teachers' performance.

1.2. Hypothesis

Knowledge or possession of the basic elements of scientific research positively contributes to EFL university teachers' professional development and enhance their career life.

2. Literature Review

The world continues to experience an increased focus on scientific knowledge and the need to apply scientific knowledge to meet the ever-changing socioeconomic environment. University teachers prepare professionals expected to provide solutions to emerging challenges. As such, University teachers should demonstrate the competence to generate and construe knowledge through the application of scientific research methods (Muğaloğlu & Bayram, 2003). Demetron (2009) defines scientific research as a continuous process characterized by rigorous reasoning supported by theories, methods, and findings. The outcome of any scientific research process is models or theories that can be tested.

Scientific research can also be viewed as scientific thinking process involving close examination of existing evidence and theory construction as applied to a specified problem or discipline (Kuhn, 2010). Modern educational systems are expected to nurture individuals or professionals with the capacity to generate new knowledge or innovations through critical reflection, and questioning the existing knowledge or evidence for a better world (European Science Foundation, 2010). According to Sahan and Tarhan (2015), university teachers should possess and demonstrate scientific research competencies or skills and most critical, a positive attitude towards scientific research. In this sense, educational institutions and particularly universities should invest in developing and nurturing scientific research skills, positive attitude and behavior among the teachers (Aslam, 2010). This requires training of all prospective university teachers', and the creation of an environment that supports development and application of scientific research skills among both teachers and the learners.

However, past studies have shown that most teachers are devoid of scientific research skills, a phenomenon that translates into production of students or professional with low levels of scientific research skills (Sahan & Tarhan, 2015). Studies have also shown poor teachers' attitude, behaviors, and low skill levels despite the emerging emphasis on the importance of scientific research skills in a highly dynamic world (Osborne, Simon & Tytler, 2009). Professional development has been found to influence the way teachers perceive effective and inquiry-based education with previous studies emphasizing on the need for more regular professional development and educational training to advance the concept of education engaged scientists (Thiry, Laursen & Hunter, 2008). According to Zulijan and Vogrinc (2010), there is a need for continuous development of teachers' competencies and qualification for innovation and research through pre- and in-service programs. This provides an opportunity for facilitating effective student learning through enhancement of teachers' research and innovative skills. Studies have shown a scientifically significant association between competencies such as teaching creativity, knowledge on subject, clarity of presentation, and clarification of learning outcomes, and student's satisfaction (Long, Ibrahim & Kowang, 2014).

In this regard, development of scientific research competency among university teachers has an immense influence on students' scientific research skills outcome. Teachers' professional development has been strongly associated with consistent higher and improvement in students' reasoning and problem-solving skills (Southern Poverty Law Center, 2016). This strongly demonstrates that investment in scientific research skills training as part of university teachers' professional development would translate into improved scientific research competencies and positive attitude among students (Southern Poverty Law Center, 2016).

3. Methodology

The study was conducted in the English Language Institute at King Abdulaziz University with forty female English instructors participating in the study.

3.1 Selection of Study Participants

Selection of participants in the study involved the determination of all instructors' backgrounds and their interest in scientific research through a well-designed form emailed to all instructors. In total, 40 instructors replied by filling in the form. However, only 30 instructors out of the 40 instructors were in a position to take part in most of the training program's activities.

3.2 Program Implementation

The data collection process began with the implementation of the training program among the selected participants. The participants were informed of the expected outcomes of the program as well as introduced to some useful materials in the area of scientific research. The expected outcome was identified as the ability to come up with a draft paper that can be used for a conference or published. The program specifically involved activities such as two hours reading of posted material per module with each module running for two weeks, online board discussion participation and participation in four research related workshops. Participants were also required to submit weekly assignments and a final project expected to be submitted at the end of the program. The program comprised of four modules with each module taking utmost two weeks and workshops conducted at the end. The workshops entailed a practical session on various elements of research including access to databases, referencing skill training, designing an online questionnaire and analysis of data using the SPSS program.

3.3 Data Collection

The data used in the study was collected using a semi-structured questionnaire self-administered to the program participants. The data was input into SPSS for analysis.

3. Results and Discussion

The data collected using the semi-structured questionnaires were analyzed and presented in form of the different elements of the program.

4.1 Satisfaction with the Program

Table 1 presents the means and standard deviations of the participants' ratings of the different elements of the program implementation. The results show a significantly higher rating of elements 1, 2, and 3 compared to other elements. The majority of the participants expressed satisfaction with most of the training program implementation with the means of seven out ten elements above 4. (See Table 1).

Questionnaire Element	Mean	Std. Deviation
1. The goals of the training program were clearly defined	4.57	.60698
2. The program was relevant to my growth and development	4.52	.61178
3. The training experience will be useful in my work	4.52	.69669
4. The program met my expectations	4.26	.87191
5. The time allocated for each module was suitable to produce the required assignment	3.47	.96427
6. The reading material posted was comprehensive and helpful	4.10	.73747
7. The topics selected for the workshops were helpful	4.47	.51299
8. The number of workshops presented was appropriate	4.36	.49559
9. More follow-up sessions were necessary	3.73	.87191
10. A direct supervisor was needed	3.94	1.07877

Table 1: Questionnaire Elements with Results

Descriptive analysis of each of the program elements shows a significantly higher satisfaction (63.2% strongly agreed) with the program orientation in which the goals of the training were clearly defined for the participants. The results show that the majority of the participants 57.9% and 63.2% strongly agreed that the program was relevant to their growth and development and was useful to their work respectively. The majority of the participants agreed that the module had been well designed to produce the desired outcome, with 63.2% and 52.6% indicating that workshop topics and the number of workshops were appropriate. The majority of the participants also agreed that the reading materials posted were comprehensive and helpful in meeting their expectations (Table 2). A significant number of the participants felt that the program needed more follow-up sessions and a direct supervisor was needed (52.6% and 47.4%) respectively.

Element (E)	Strongly agree	Agree	Not sure	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
E1	63.2	31.6	5.3	0	0
E2	57.9	36.8	5.3	0	0
E3	63.2	26.3	10.5	0	0
E4	47.4	36.8	10.5	5.3	0
E5	10.5	47.4	21.1	21.1	0
E6	31.6	47.4	21.1	0	0
E7	47.4	52.6	0	0	0
E8	36.8	63.2	0	0	0
E9	15.8	52.6	21.1	10.5	0
E10	31.6	47.4	10.5	5.3	5.3

Table 2: Questionnaire Results for each Element

4.2 Relevance of the Training Program to Professional Growth and Development

The majority of the participants agreed and strongly agreed that the training program was relevant to their professional growth and development (Figure 1).

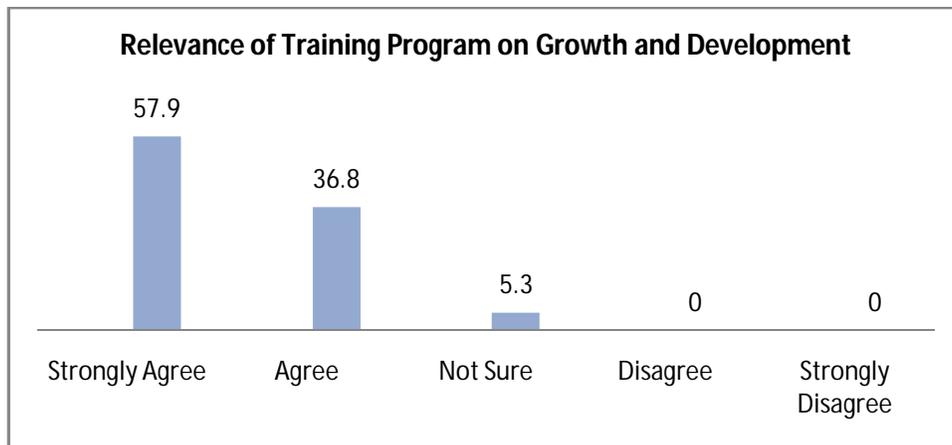


Figure1: Relevance of the Training Program

4.3 Effect of the Training Program on Teachers' Performance

Participants strongly believe that participating in a research program can positively affect their career as EFL teachers as can be seen in the following figure.

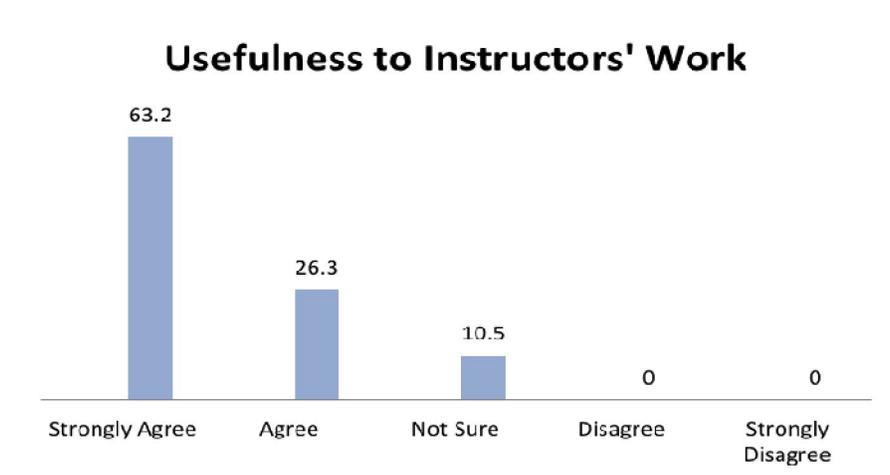


Figure 2: Usefulness to Instructors' work

The majority of the participants strongly agreed and agreed that the training program met their expectations with only a small percentage disagreeing as shown in the figure below.

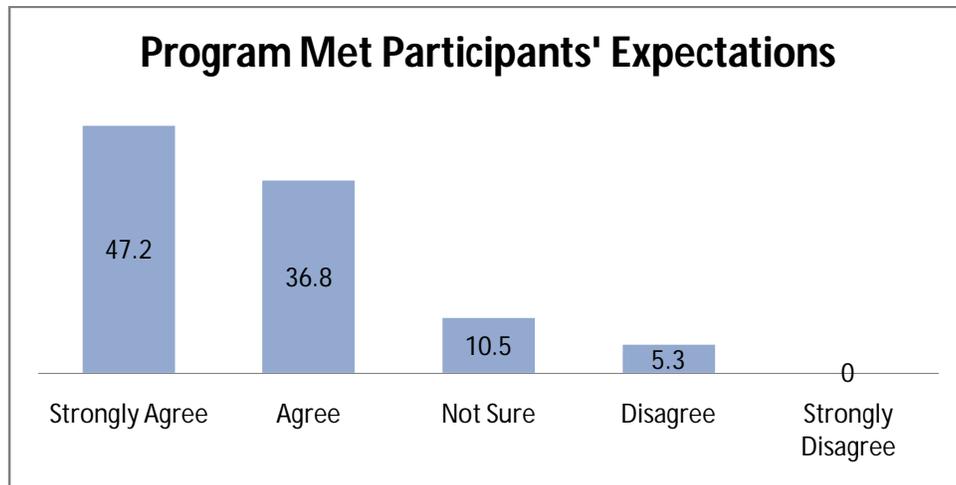


Figure 3. Instructors' Satisfaction

4.4 Open-Ended Responses

The responses were organized around four themes including the strongest areas of the program, areas of improvement to make the course more effective, suggestions of additional topics or areas that need follow-up training, and the take-home lesson from the program.

4.4.1 Strongest areas of the Program

Participants found the workshops conducted, the supervision and support provided, the reading material, the discussions in the follow-up sessions, and the step-by-step introduction to research methodology to be the strongest areas of the program.

4.4.2 Possible Areas of Improvement in the Program

Some of them suggested providing extra time to complete the assignments, a more direct supervision with a smaller number of participants, more sharing of ideas in addition to conducting research seminars to improve the program. Other suggested providing different tracks according to the participant's background in the area.

4.4.3 Suggested additional Topics or Areas That Need Follow-up Training

Most participants suggested that focusing more on academic writing, developing research questions, citation, survey designing and more on data analysis will be of great help. This positive attitude indicates their willingness to develop even further.

4.4.4 Take Home Message or Learning Point from the Program

Participants indicated that the program had helped them acknowledge the importance of scientific research. The program further served as a motivation to pursue further education to enhance their skills and actualize career growth and development. It provided them with the tool to start their own research and become more confident as a teacher researcher. It gave them the confidence to carry out research independently exploring new ideas and solving classroom problems through research. They mentioned that being in a research team added upon their perspective at the institute and increased their ability to present more effective lessons. They became more focused on students' responses. The program enhanced their writing, observation skills, and teaching strategies.

4.5 Discussion

Previous studies have focused on students' knowledge, application and attitude towards scientific research with only a few studies focusing on the instructors. This study set out to determine the relevance of a research-oriented training program to EFL teachers' growth and development. The study further sought to determine whether a research-oriented training positively affects EFL teachers' performance. The study found out that the majority of the participants believed that the program was relevant to their growth and development, and respectively to their career. These findings are similar to other studies that have found the implementation of training programs to be useful in enhancing professional development and growth among teachers (Zulijan & Vogrinc, 2010).

In addition, past studies have shown that the participation in professional development programs among teachers was associated with improved student performance. Such findings support this study's findings. Instructors felt that a research-oriented training positively influenced their performance. The study also found that the majority of the participants agreed that the program had been well designed to produce the desired outcome. Participants indicated that the workshop topics and the number of workshops were appropriate. The majority of the participants also agreed that the reading materials posted were comprehensive and helpful in meeting their expectations. Such findings reveal a positive attitude towards scientifically oriented training among instructors. These findings were further supported by the open-ended question responses in which the participants indicated that the program had served to motivate them to pursue higher education. Participants also indicated that the training program had provided them with the tool to start their own research and become more confident as a teacher researcher.

Participants identified the workshops conducted, the supervision and support provided, the reading material, the discussions in the follow-up sessions, and the step-by-step introduction to research methodology as the strongest areas of the program. As such, future training programs can focus on these areas to ensure that their programs meet the expectations of the participants.

However, participants also identified possible areas of improvement in the program including providing extra time to complete the assignments, a more direct supervision with less number of participants, more sharing of ideas in addition to conducting research seminars to improve the program. These are important areas that could be considered in designing and implementing future training programs targeting instructors. The participants also identified training on academic writing, developing research questions, citation, survey designing and more on data analysis as areas where increased attention should be directed to enhance instructors' scientific research competencies.

Lastly, the study revealed that the program had equipped participants with scientific research skills that would help them start their own research and become more confident as a teacher researcher. It gave them the confidence to carry out research independently exploring new ideas and solving classroom problems through research. The findings demonstrate the relevance of a scientific research oriented training program in the growth and development of instructors. The findings also show that such programs play a critical role in nurturing positive attitude towards scientific research among instructors. It was clear that the participants felt motivated to pursue further studies and conduct their own research to improve their teaching skills and students' classroom experience.

5. Conclusion

Scientific research-oriented training emerges as an important area of focus in professional development for university teachers. The findings in this study revealed that the majority of the participants perceived the training program to be relevant to their growth and professional development, and useful to their work. The study established that a well-designed research-oriented training program for instructors has the potential to nurture important research skills and cultivate a positive attitude towards scientific research. Such programs also have the potential to motivate instructors to engage in research aimed at identifying new teaching strategies as well as pursue higher learning. This would, in turn, translate to improved student performance and development of professionals with the capacity to solve emerging issues in the world. As such, universities should invest in designing and implementing research-oriented training programs not only for English language instructors but also across the various departments. The implementation of a research-oriented training program can equip instructors with adequate research skills necessary to prepare students and professionals with skills that can provide innovative solutions to emerging issues and generate new knowledge.

6. Recommendations for Further Studies

The program implemented can be done in a different context at different faculties with a smaller number of participants and direct supervision. The time allocated for the whole program and for each module can be extended to give enough time for a higher-quality outcome. Moreover, the reading material can be enriched, adding extra reading to enhance instructors' knowledge. Seminars may be conducted to familiarize instructors even more with the idea of research. The same study can be duplicated using the same questionnaire in addition to conducting some interviews.

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