Research Paper

A Mixed-Method Analysis of Continuing Professional Development for EFL Teachers

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Abstract

This study explores how Tunisian teachers of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) understand Continuing Professional Development (CPD) and how the in-service training they receive from the inspectors shapes their beliefs about the role(s) of self-explorations in achieving autonomous CPD. It adopts a mixed-method design consisting of a questionnaire answered by 99 EFL teachers working in public schools across the country and interviews conducted with three EFL inspectors from different Regional Directorates of Education. The analysis of the data collected with the two instruments confirms that the preparation areas chosen for the teachers are exclusively determined by the inspectors, with minimum interference from the teachers; the majority of the surveyed teachers link their CPD cycles to the supervision provided by the inspectors; and the inspectors seem to have a deeper understanding of CPD, but they consistently advocate some degree of involvement in the teachers' self-explorations.

Keywords: *Continuing Professional Development, EFL Teacher Education, Self-Exploration, Autonomous Professional Growth.*

INTRODUCTION

In Tunisia, the Ministry of Education is responsible for hiring teachers of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) for public schools and training them for a teaching career that may last for more than 35 years, depending on the age of the teacher at the time of recruitment. The Ministry also hires EFL inspectors, usually through a national examination targeting experienced EFL teachers, and the role of inspectors is to prepare EFL teachers for their job and supervise their professional growth throughout their career. EFL teachers receive intensive training and guidance in the initial phase of their career and then remain under the lens of the inspector, although the frequency of training sessions they attend with the inspector decreases with time. This paper questions the impact of this supervision mode on the teachers' understanding of Continuing Professional Development (CPD), the extent to which they feel encouraged to seek professional-development opportunities away from the inspector's guidance and supervision, and the types of explorations they are encouraged to engage in to reduce their reliance on the feedback of the inspector and learn from their own classroom practices.

The supervision they receive from the inspector helps maintain a teaching career that benefits from the recommendations of a knowledgeable outsider, but it may also deprive them of alternative professional-development opportunities, especially those coming from the EFL classroom itself. While supervision from the inspector provides the teachers with direct guidance and does not require any particular research skills, self-initiated explorations of one's teaching practices may require the teacher to learn how to conceptualize and implement a classroom-research design that helps them deepen their understanding of their own practices to make their pedagogical choices more informed. In this context, the study aims to assess the worth of a teacher-

preparation mode that has been in place for decades but remained relatively under-researched in Tunisia. It seeks to answer the following questions:

1. What is the nature of CPD achieved by Tunisian EFL teachers under the supervision of the inspectors?
2. How do Tunisian EFL teachers understand autonomous CPD?
3. To what extent do Tunisian EFL inspectors encourage teachers to engage in autonomous CPD?

LITERATURE REVIEW

EFL teachers usually go through two preparation phases (Lee, 2007; Richards, 1998; Samson & Collins, 2012; Tedick, 2005; Zhan, 2008). The first phase, commonly known as pre-service training, precedes their recruitment and may include courses and seminars related to teaching in their undergraduate and graduate studies, like Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL), Teaching English to Young Learners (TEYL), Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL), etc. It may also include conferences, workshops, or courses related to the different aspects of the teaching job, usually organized by private institutions and organizations, like the online webinars offered by institutions concerned with TEFL and TESOL worldwide. The second phase, widely known as in-service preparation, usually starts when the teacher is hired. It focuses more on the teachers' needs in their immediate professional contexts, and is often supervised by individuals and institutions favoring specific teaching methodologies, sets of course materials, types of evaluation modes, etc. The main task of the supervising body/person is to guarantee the teachers' adherence to the syllabus and the recommended teaching and testing practices (Stuart et al., 2009; Tedick, 2005). Obviously, there are other types of teaching contexts where EFL teachers may not receive direct supervision and may enjoy more freedom in implementing teaching methods of their choice, but this difference does not contradict the general division of pedagogical preparation into the two phases mentioned above.

The same division does not imply that there is a point in a teacher's career where preparation is over. Each phase may focus on different aspects of teaching, but the idea of professional growth refers to an ongoing developmental cycle, viewing the teacher as a learner, someone in constant quest for improvement and development (Richards, 2008). CPD is a long cycle of teacher education that covers a wide repertoire of proficiencies that the teacher acquires from primary training to the end of their teaching career. It is a dynamic process that accumulates experiences and shapes the teacher's pedagogical-reasoning skills over time (Borg, 2014; Farrell, 2014; Richards and Farrell, 2005; Tedick, 2005). This process can be informed by different sources that range from the courses and training sessions received in the pre-service phase to the personal inquiries conducted by the teacher independently or under the guidance of an advisor during the teaching career. It can also be done in collaboration with other people, especially peer teachers working in similar contexts and adopting the same teaching methodology, or with broader audiences seeking innovation and development, especially in client-centered events focusing on specific aspects of the teaching/learning process, usually delivered by specialized experts online or in face-to-face settings. CPD experiences usually fall into three broad categories: they can be controlled, collaborative, or independent (Flecknoe, 2002; Sandholtz, 2002).

Controlled CPD, also known as supervised CPD, refers to professional growth achieved by teachers under the control/supervision of an advisor/inspector appointed by the school, the district, or the ministry to accompany teachers in acquiring specific skills and proficiencies related to different aspects of their job (Sandholtz, 2002). The form and content of the preparation sessions in this type of CPD is usually chosen by the supervisor, based on their own assessment of the teachers' needs in the light of the teaching method they are expected to adopt, or the teaching

materials they are supposed to use (Stuart et al., 2009). In this form of CPD, the training received by teachers is usually structured in the same way input is structured for students. The supervisor selects the aspects they would train teachers on in the same way a teacher would select the language aspects they would introduce their students to. Although controlled CPD guarantees homogenous preparation for teachers working in similar contexts and dealing with similar teaching materials or adopting similar teaching methods, it can increase the teachers' dependence on the choices made by the supervisor and reduce their willingness for innovation or quest for self-guided growth (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017; Richards, 2015). Controlled CPD activities can take different forms; the two major ones are workshops and classroom observations.

Workshops

Online and face-to-face workshops are often preferred by supervisors to engage EFL teachers in hands-on experiences on different aspects of their daily job. Although a workshop is a preparation format that may allow for constructive interactions between peer teachers, the form and content of the training session are usually completely determined by the supervisor, which reduces the teachers' involvement in selecting the pedagogical issues to be trained on (Stuart et al., 2009).

Classroom observations

EFL teachers working under the supervision of an advisor/inspector may be invited to different types of classroom observations (also known as lesson demonstrations) to explore various aspects of the teaching/learning process being observed (Bell et al., 2014). The supervisor often selects the aspect to be observed, the teacher who would give the observed lesson, and may even ask the teacher to implement a specific aspect in a certain way for teachers to learn from it or discuss it in a post-observation session. Similar to workshops, observing peer teachers in their ordinary classrooms may offer opportunities for teachers to learn from each other, but the fact that the content of the lesson in focus and the teaching method to deliver it are decided by the supervisor may prevent teachers from exploring wider pedagogical issues and exchanging perspectives on aspects of the teaching/learning process that the supervisor decided not to focus on.

The second mode is collaborative CPD. It refers to professional-growth activities conducted by peer teachers working in the same or similar contexts or required to adopt similar teaching methods or course materials (Farrell, 2014; Little, 2003). This form of CPD is not usually conducted under the supervision of an advisor/inspector, but it requires cooperation and collaboration between teachers desiring to explore pedagogical issues relevant to their teaching contexts. Collaborative CPD can be conducted in multiple formats, like peer observation and teacher-support groups.

Peer observation

Teachers can visit each other in their classrooms and conduct focused observations and exchange feedback on different aspects of the observed teaching/learning process (Ridge and Lanvigne, 2020). This form of collaborative inquiry is convenient for teachers wishing to explore specific aspects of their teaching/learning processes together. It can involve two to three teachers visiting each other in their EFL classes, observing general or particular teaching practices, and exchanging views on the effectiveness of these practices to improve them or replace them with alternative options. Peer observation allows for sharing knowledge and experience between teachers away from the critical lens of the advisor/inspector, and gives importance to synergy and cooperation in the teachers' quest for professional growth.

Teacher-support groups

This activity is similar to peer observation as it also relies on the collaboration between small groups of teachers to study the merits of specific teaching practices (Cohen et al., 2004). However, it is different from peer observation because it does not necessarily involve observing one another. The teacher support group may include teachers interested in the same pedagogical aspect, but the activities they perform while gathered may include other tasks, such as designing lesson plans, analyzing test items, discussing teaching methods, examining alternative course materials, etc. The group is thought to create a professional space for debate and sharing, and encourage teachers to learn from the experiences of their fellow teachers, making professional development a shared endeavor, and the exchanges with other teachers a source of learning.

The last mode is independent or autonomous CPD. It refers to the teachers' self-initiated endeavors to study or explore specific aspects of their teaching/learning process (Bates, 2004; Desimone, 2009; Farrell, 2014; Shamim, 2008). It includes any exploratory or experimental work led by the teacher to improve specific teaching practices or assess the value of alternative practices in enhancing student learning. Autonomous CPD usually does not require the presence of a supervisor or a fellow teacher, which makes it very different from all the CPD activities listed above. Independent CPD can be conducted in various ways; the two most important examples are self-observation and action research.

Self-observation

EFL teachers can video-record their own teaching and reflect on their own pedagogical moves by observing their videos. This activity may allow them to have an outsider's view on the ways they engage learners, deliver input, organize participation, give feedback, ask questions, etc. (Farrell, 2014). Self-observations may guide the teachers to more informed pedagogical moves and may incite them to try out different alternatives in relation to various aspects of the teaching/learning process. They can even video-record various scenarios to do similar activities to reach conclusions about the most effective ways a specific move is implemented. The analysis of the video may focus on specific types of activities or on the lesson as a whole, depending on what the teacher wishes to explore and improve.

Action research

It can be defined as research "done by teachers to gain insight and develop reflective practices that positively influence their students' outcomes and contribute to the improvement of their own educational practices in general" (Harrera, 2018, p 130). Action research is usually used when the teacher finds something problematic and wants to investigate it and propose an alternative way to implement it. This type of research usually takes the form of a cycle of actions (Burns, 2010; Davis, 2007; Elliott, 2001; Herrera, 2018; Johnson, 2012):
1. Diagnose a problem/select an area of research;
2. Develop a research/action plan;
3. Collect data;
4. Analyze data;
5. Take action

Action research is considered one of the most important tools for autonomous CPD because it helps the teacher reflect on their own teaching and try out alternatives to solve different types of issues. However, teachers may need to do some training on the types of issues that can be investigated using action research, the various methods and instruments they can use to collect the desired data, and how to make relevant interpretations to adopt the right alternatives with regard to the issue being investigated.

Interestingly, the six strategies listed above are just examples on the ways CPD can be achieved in the mentioned traditions. Teachers can opt for other types of activities requiring different degrees of autonomy in their quest for professional growth. These include team coaching, group teaching, teacher logs, portfolios, etc. (For an exhaustive list of these activities, see e.g. Burns and Richards (2009).

RESEARCH METHOD

This study adopts a mixed-method research design allowing for the collection of quantitative and qualitative data in relation to (1) how Tunisian EFL teachers understand CPD, (2) whether the public trainings they attend support self-initiated CPD, and (3) the types of classroom-research activities they tend to engage in. The data related to these points were collected through a questionnaire answered by 99 EFL teachers and interviews conducted with three EFL inspectors responsible for designing and implementing training sessions for the teachers. The data-collection process lasted from April to June 2025. It was conducted in two major phases. In the first phase, the researcher sent the questionnaire to over 150 EFL teachers across the country, using emails and social media to guarantee a larger number of respondents, and in the second phase he conducted the interviews with the three inspectors. In both phases, the convenience-sampling technique was adopted. Convenience sampling refers to selecting participants who are more accessible to the researcher. In this study, most EFL teachers and all EFL inspectors are available in the researcher's larger network in reality and on social media.

The questionnaire included 20 items and was answered online by 99 Tunisian EFL teachers. It elicited information from the teachers on the form and content of the preparation they receive from the inspector (questions 1-7); the topics/areas they desire to learn more in future preparation sessions (questions 8-10); the professional growth opportunities they have engaged in apart from those organized by the inspector (questions 11-15); and their understanding of independent professional growth and experience with it (questions 16-20). The analysis method used with the data collected from the questionnaire relied mainly on descriptive inferential statistics. The sets of data collected from each sub-section are presented numerically and then interpreted collectively, formulating conclusions on the tendencies drawn from the teachers' responses.

To evaluate the extent to which Tunisian EFL teachers are encouraged to conduct personal explorations of their own teaching and engage in self-initiated professional development, the researcher conducted semi-structured interviews with three EFL inspectors from three Regional Directorates of Education. The choice for the semi-structured format was meant to guarantee some flexibility with the organization of the questions and the possibility of adding questions that may arise from the inspectors' answers. The semi-structured interview included nine open questions that were organized into three thematic sections: the inspectors' reflections on the preparation activities they design and implement (questions 1-4); their views on the areas where teachers can easily adopt and implement more independent CPD activities (questions 5-7); and how they usually encourage teachers to explore their own teaching (questions 8-9). The analysis of the data collected through the interviews followed the same pattern. The responses received from the inspectors were scrutinized comparatively, which allowed for spotting areas of convergence and divergence in the collected answers.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The analysis of the data collected with the two instruments will follow the order of the research questions listed above. The first part will present the quantitative findings related to the nature of CPD achieved by Tunisian EFL teachers under the supervision of the inspectors and how

they (the teachers) understand autonomous CPD; and the second part will focus on the qualitative insights collected from the inspectors on engaging teachers in self-explorations and independent CPD initiatives.

Quantitative Analysis

To study how Tunisian EFL teachers understand CPD, the first part of the questionnaire focused on the nature of the training activities they receive from the inspector. The study collected responses from 99 teachers working in different public schools across the country and having different teaching experiences. Table 1 illustrates the distribution of respondents by teaching experience.

Table 1. Distribution of respondents by teaching experience

Teaching experience	1 to 5 years	6 to 10 years	11 to 15 years	More than 15 years
Number of respondents	17	16	12	54

The majority of respondents have a teaching experience of more than 15 years (54.5%). This may be explained by the change in the teacher recruitment method adopted by the Ministry of Education. In fact, in the period from 1998 to 2017, the Ministry used to recruit secondary school teachers through a National Teacher Aptitude Exam (Known as CAPES, a widely used acronym for the French expression Concours d'Aptitude au Professorat de l'Enseignement Secondaire). After 2017, the Ministry of Education abandoned this employment method and started recruiting teachers based on different selection criteria, targeting part-time teachers who were invited by the Regional Directorates of Education to fill in the gaps resulting from the lack of recruitment on the national level. Almost half of the respondents (45.5%) belong to this second category, ensuring a wide representation of teachers with different experiences.

To study the teachers' perspectives on the form and content of the in-service preparation they have received since they started teaching, questions 2, 3, and 4 of the questionnaire asked them to describe the preparation they received from their inspector and the frequency of training sessions they attended. In their responses to the second question, 49.5% of them judged the preparation they received as "relatively adequate", but "some of their needs were not met". The remaining answers were almost equally divided between two opposite views: "very adequate" (24.2%) and "poor" (26.3%). The general attitude seems to be negative, as 75.8% of them maintained that "some of their needs were not met" or that "they rely on themselves to meet their needs".

This attitude was further stressed in their responses to question 3 on the number of CPD events they have attended in the current school year, as 82.8% of them said that these events did not exceed three sessions (Table 2). This finding seems to confirm the generally negative attitude stated earlier towards the adequacy of the preparation they have received from the inspectors. Besides, 73.7% of the respondents maintained that the frequency of CPD events organized by the inspector "has decreased" with time (question 4), implying that the inspectors tend to give more importance to training in the initial phase of a teacher's career.

Table 2. Number of CPD events attended by the teachers in the current school year

Frequency of training sessions	1 to 3 sessions	4 to 6 sessions	More than 6 sessions
Number of responses	82	11	6

In their reflections on the content of the CPD events they have attended (question 5), 41.4% of the respondents maintained that "workshops" were the most recurrent type of sessions. The remaining answers were in the following order: "lectures and seminars" (28.3%), "classroom observations" (15.2%), and "other" (15.1%). This finding seems to correlate with the respondents' reflections on their involvement in the CPD events supervised by the inspectors (questions 6 and 7). In their responses to the question on their role in these events, 46.5% of the respondents maintained that they were "passive recipients of information", and 66.7% of them said that the inspector "did not involve them in choosing the topics they would be trained on". These two figures show that most respondents think that the CPD sessions they have attended were more centered on the inspector, which raises the questions of the teacher's involvement in determining their personal professional needs and the inspector's awareness about the heterogeneous nature of these needs.

Leaving the CPD events organized by the inspectors, the following set of questions (questions 8-10) tried to elicit information from the teachers on their understanding of autonomous CPD, namely the areas in which they wish to receive more training (question 8); the coherence between their immediate needs and the content they have been trained on (question 9); and the types of CPD activities they think are more important for their future career (question 10).

Reflecting on their professional needs and the CPD areas they wish to explore in more depth, the responses came very diverse, including areas like "the use ICT in teaching", "how to make activities more enjoyable", "exam preparation and correction", "time management", "materials adaptation", "differentiated instruction in mixed-ability classrooms", "creativity in lesson planning", etc. The wide variety of areas listed by the teachers shows their diverse needs in the different contexts they work in, and puts into question the relevance of attending CPD events focusing on matters chosen by the inspectors and delivered in three sessions or less during the whole school year. In line with this finding, the teachers' responses to the question on the way these CPD events are organized and whether they meet the changing nature of their job (question 9), 65.7% of them view these CPD events as poorly organized. The responses to these two questions highlight a mismatch between the type of CPD they wish to achieve and the type of training they receive under the supervision of the inspectors. The general attitude towards the inspectors' understanding of the teachers' needs seems to be negative, as the respondents listed different areas that they consider important to the current phase of their career and maintained that the inspectors' views regarding these areas, as reflected in the way they have organized their preparation sessions, remain general and cannot meet their diverse needs.

To further understand the teachers' immediate CPD needs, question 10 asked them to select the types of training sessions they think are more important for their future career. Their responses are illustrated in Table 3.

Table 3. Teachers' reflections on effective future CPD activities

Training activities	Teacher journals and logs	Teacher-support groups	Peer coaching	Lectures and seminars	Classroom observations	Workshops
Number of responses	23	42	37	21	45	77

The CPD activities given to teachers in question 10 were meant to explore the extent to which they would tie their future preferences to choices made by the inspector. The high occurrence of "workshops" (77 times) and "classroom observations" (45 times) seems to imply that the teachers' awareness about the importance of the inspector in supervising their professional growth led them to select activities that require supervision. The less frequent activities in the teachers' responses included "teacher support groups" (42 times) and "peer coaching" (37 times), which fit more into the autonomous-CPD tradition. The teachers' reflections on the type of CPD they wish to achieve in the future seem to be tightly connected to the training mode established by the Ministry of Education, a mode in which the inspector is viewed a trainer and evaluator, one who supervises the teachers' professional growth and evaluates their adherence to the teaching and testing methods officially adopted by the Ministry.

The third section of the questionnaire (questions 11-15) elicited information from the respondents on their experiences with professional growth activities that were not supervised by the inspector. In their answers to two yes/no questions (questions 11 and 12) on whether they sought professional growth opportunities other than those organized by the inspector and whether they engaged in professional growth activities with their fellow teachers (question 12), the vast majority of them answered "no" (55.6% and 73.7% respectively). These answers confirm the finding presented earlier on the teachers' tendency to think of professional growth as a process tightly connected to the inspector. Reconsidering the respondents' perceptions presented at the beginning of the analysis, qualifying the training received from the inspectors as "poor" and asserting that their "needs are not met" presupposes a different position regarding independent and peer professional growth, and a more positive attitude towards collaboration with other teachers.

To further explore the respondents' familiarity with professional growth opportunities available for Tunisian EFL teachers, question 13 asked them if they knew any institutions or organizations that provide online training. Only 33.3% said they were familiar with these institutions. In the second half of the same question, those who responded "yes" were requested to name some of these institutions, and their answers mentioned some of these; the most recurrent ones were Amideast and the British Council. The remaining 66.7% of the respondents did not seem to be familiar with any opportunities besides those supervised by the inspector. Interestingly, this finding seems to contradict the findings collected from question 14 on whether the teachers keep a portfolio (or e-portfolio) documenting their professional growth. In their responses to this question, 56.6% of the surveyed teachers maintained that they do keep portfolios. Linking the two findings on the teachers' familiarity with institutions offering online professional growth opportunities and keeping portfolios to document professional growth, it seems that the teachers understand the word portfolio as the collection of training documents they receive from the inspector in preparation sessions, and not as a tool for self-reflection, detailing all the professional development experiences they went through, with the inspector or on their own.

The last question in the third section of the questionnaire (question 15) asked the respondents whether they had ever questioned any aspects of the training sessions they had attended with the inspector. In their responses, 67.7% of the respondents asserted that they never did. This passive attitude among the surveyed teachers consolidates the finding reached through question 6, as 46.5% of them maintained that they consider themselves as "passive recipients of information" in the preparation sessions organized by the inspectors. Once again, the finding confirms a widely shared attitude among teachers viewing their professional development as a task elaborated and supervised by the inspector, with limited openness to opportunities available in the outside world and activities implemented autonomously or in collaboration with peers.

The last section of the questionnaire focused on the teachers' experiences with independent CPD initiatives, regardless of the extent to which these initiatives are common. The first question in this section (question 16) asked the respondents about the frequency of self-initiated activities meant to explore their own teaching. The answers are illustrated in Table 4.

Table 4. Frequency of self-initiated CPD activities

Frequency of self-initiated activities	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Always
Number of responses	4	34	53	8

Although 61.6% of the surveyed teachers said they sometimes/always engage in CPD activities meant to explore their own teaching, the type and nature of these activities remain unknown. To further explore their familiarity with action research as an effective instrument to explore classroom practices and solve issues related to different aspects of the teaching/learning process, the teachers were also asked if they were familiar with this type of research (question 17). Interestingly, 69.7% of them maintained that they were not familiar with it. For those who said they were familiar with action research, question 18 asked them to specify what it is most useful for. Surprisingly, even those who confirmed their familiarity with this research method gave answers that proved a very limited understanding of it. Some of them maintained that they "have no idea" or "they cannot answer this question". Even those who tried to answer differently, their answers never mentioned the usefulness of action research in finding informed solutions to classroom problems; rather, they mentioned general aspects of the teaching/learning process, such as "improving teaching strategies", classroom management", "enhancing knowledge and satisfying curiosity".

Besides action research, question 19 asked the teachers if they had ever recorded their own lessons to observe their own teaching, and here again, the vast majority (71.7%) of them said they never did. This finding may be explained by the fact that the inspectors occasionally visit the teachers in their classrooms, observe them, and write detailed reports on the teaching-learner processes they have observed. The reports usually include grades attributed to the teachers based on the inspectors' evaluations, and these visits help the teachers accumulate better grades over time. The feedback that the teachers have been receiving from the inspectors over the years may have reduced their willingness to record their own teaching and analyze it for professional growth purposes.

To further explore the extent to which the teachers are dependent on the inspector's guidance even in issues they face in their classrooms, the last question of the questionnaire (question 20) asked them how they usually solve their classroom issues and provided them with four possible actions. The findings collected from this question are illustrated in Table 5.

Table 5. How teachers solve classroom issues

Strategy	Consulting with colleagues	Contacting the inspector	Solving the issue by relying on experience	Exploring solutions through reading
Number of responses	34	4	39	22

The answers to this question were varied. Although a very small portion of the answers opted for contacting the inspector for solutions (4%), the most recurrent answer was finding solutions based on one's experience (39.4%). It is important to mention that the notion of experience does not necessarily imply that the teacher is able to solve an issue effectively just by relying on the pedagogical experience they have accumulated over the years. Sometimes, experience may stand as an impediment to innovation and may prevent the teacher from adopting the right method to handle a specific issue. The remaining answers (56.5%) opted for consulting with colleagues and exploring solutions in readings and on the Internet. Although these answers may imply a tendency for collaborative or independent professional growth, they remain somewhat contradictory with some of the findings presented above, namely, how teachers link their professional development to the preparation plans prepared by the inspector. To reach more valid conclusions on this issue, the following part of the analysis will focus on the perceptions of the inspectors.

Qualitative Analysis

This part of the analysis focuses on the interviews conducted with three Tunisian EFL inspectors. The interviews were meant to collect insights to complete the picture on how CDP is understood in the Tunisian EFL context. The quantitative analysis has found that most Tunisian EFL teachers link their understanding of CPD to the preparation offered by the inspectors, which makes the perceptions of the inspectors of extreme relevance to study how CPD is understood and whether teachers are encouraged to seek independent professional-growth opportunities. The data collected from the inspectors' answers focus on (1) the preparation activities they design for teachers; (2) their views on the areas where teachers can adopt and implement independent CPD activities; and (3) how they encourage teachers to explore their own teaching and learn from it. In the section below, the inspectors will be referred to as I1, I2, and I3 (inspector 1, inspector 2, inspector 3), reflecting the chronological order in which the interviews took place.

At the beginning of the interviews, the inspectors were asked to introduce themselves. While I1 and I2 provided short answers including their names and the years they were appointed in the position (both in 2010), I3 gave more background on himself, stating that he has been in this position for 14 years, dedicating himself to "promoting excellence in English language teaching through evaluation, support, and professional development initiatives".

When asked on how they usually plan their annual training activities, I1 said that at the beginning of the year, he prepares "a calendar for training and demo [demonstration] lessons", implying that the series of events he decides to implement is guided by his own understanding of the teachers' needs. As for I2, he listed five factors that he takes into consideration when designing his annual preparation plan, and these include "teachers' needs, national priorities, classroom observations [his own evaluative observations of EFL teachers], curriculum updates, and exam results". Some of the elements found in this answer were echoed in the answer of I3, who mentioned factors like "conducting a needs analysis", "regular classroom observations", and "national curriculum developments", in addition to "a rigorous examination of inspection reports". These reports are usually prepared by the same inspector after visits to the concerned teachers in their ordinary EFL lessons. Taking the three answers together, it is obvious that the preparation plans prepared by the inspectors are designed in the start of the school year and the elements they take into consideration are either centralized sources of information, mainly from the Ministry of Education (national priorities, national curriculum developments) or data collected from the inspector's work in previous school years (classroom observations, exam results, inspection reports). At no point did any inspector hint at adaptability or the possibility of modifying their preparation plan in the course of the year based on the changing needs of the teachers.

To further explore how the inspectors determine the relevance of the different preparation modes in achieving the goals of their annual plans, the following question asked them about the factors they usually take into consideration when deciding on the preparation session format (workshop, classroom observation, etc.). In his answer to this question, I1 said that the choice of the session type is based on needs analysis and broad national themes, meaning that his diagnosis of teachers' needs in the different phases of the school year and the recommendations he receives from the Ministry help him in determining the session type for the kind of preparation he intends to deliver. As for I2, the session type is determined in the light of "the teachers' experience level, the nature of the topic, available resources, and the desired outcomes". This answer implies that he may opt for different session formats for different groups of teachers, which echoes the idea of teachers' needs invoked by I1. In his answer to the same question, I3 maintained that the selection of session type should be "aligned with professional growth goals", adding that workshops are best suited for developing practical teaching skills, and demonstration lessons offer opportunities for effective teaching strategies in action. He also said that webinars offer "flexible and convenient learning, especially for teachers in remote areas," and peer observation "facilitates reflective practice. The classification of training sessions in light of the goal the inspector intends to achieve does not mention teachers' needs directly, but those needs remain an essential part of selecting the appropriate session type. However, the three inspectors never mentioned any sort of systematic research on those needs, and their understanding of them seems influenced by their interactions and exchanges with the teachers and the inspection work they conducted in the previous years.

The last question in this first section of the interview asked the inspectors how they usually measure the effectiveness of their preparation sessions. Two inspectors (I1 and I2) maintained that the effectiveness of their sessions can be measured during "classroom observations/follow-up visits" by analyzing "teacher performance" and "the implementation of training strategies in actual practice". They think that seeing aspects of their preparation integrated into the teacher's classroom practices is indicative of the effectiveness of their training sessions. This focus on classroom practices was not reiterated by I3, who listed a variety of tools that he said he uses "to measure the effectiveness of training sessions for teachers", including observation feedback sheets, grids, and checklists, implying that he requests teachers' feedback on the appropriateness of the content they receive in training sessions, and therefore on the extent to which the preparation is helping them meet their needs.

The second part of the interview was devoted to the inspectors' views on the areas where teachers can easily implement autonomous CPD activities. The first question in this section asked them if their preparation sessions encourage teachers to engage in autonomous professional growth initiatives. The three inspectors said that the form and content of their training sessions "include reflection activities and provide resources" (I2) for teachers, "considering professional growth as an ongoing self-driven process" and "equipping the teachers with the tools to continue learning beyond the session" (I3). There is a general agreement among the three interviewees that their preparation activities include components of autonomous CPD. To further explore their attitudes towards the teachers' self-initiated CPD activities, the following question asked them to list areas of professional development that they think do not require immediate supervision from them.

In their answers to this question, they listed a wide variety of areas, including classroom management strategies, the use of digital tools, lesson planning, adapting materials, etc. (I2 and I3). Their answers also included research methods that the teacher can adopt to implement CPD tasks not requiring direct supervision from them, including reflective teaching (I1) and "action research, [which] allows teachers to research and enhance their own practice" (I3). Although the autonomous CPD areas listed by the inspectors are rich and varied, and the research methods mentioned are

appropriate for the independent exploration of various aspects of the teaching/learning process, the inspectors' answers to these questions do not match well with the answers given by the teachers in the last part of the questionnaire. The analysis of the teachers' understanding of the effectiveness of action research in exploring their own teaching showed that 69.7% of them are not familiar with this research method. The contradiction in the answers given by the inspectors and the teachers may show that the inspectors' preparation sessions are viewed by both parties as effective tools for CPD, reducing the teachers' personal experiences with research aimed at exploring their practices to a mere complementary activity that can be conducted by the teacher when they wish to do so. This attitude towards the preparation offered by the inspector as the essence of CPD may explain the teachers' limited understanding of classroom-exploration methods, like action research, although it was mentioned repeatedly in the inspectors' answers.

The inspectors were also asked to share examples of CPD projects that were designed and implemented by teachers with minimal or no intervention from them. The answers given by the three inspectors have exclusively focused on collaborative activities, including peer mentoring initiatives (I1) and working together to design supplementary materials (I2), without mentioning a single example of autonomous CPD. One of the inspectors did not miss the opportunity to stress the importance of creating "a balance between autonomy and accountability" (I3), implying that even autonomous initiatives should be scrutinized by the inspector. He explained that in this type of CPD initiatives, his role would be limited to "integrating ongoing informal support, such as feedback, discussion, and check-up with formal time for reflection" (I3). According to this view, even autonomous and collaborative CPD initiatives should be assessed by the inspector, which echoes the finding mentioned earlier regarding how teachers link effective CPD to the choices made by the inspector. Both parts seem convinced that the inspector's supervision is needed in all types of professional-growth initiatives, regardless of their nature.

The last part of the interview included two questions on how often the inspectors encourage the teachers to investigate their own teaching and the types of topics/issues that can be easily investigated by the teachers without direct guidance from the inspectors. The three inspectors maintained that they encourage teachers to explore their own teaching by suggesting exploratory practices and encouraging them to document and share their findings (I2), stressing that "inspectors do not give recipes" (I1), and that "teachers can build several areas of professional development independently" (I3). Again, the answer of I2 is indicative of the attitude mentioned above, an attitude viewing CPD as a process monitored by the inspector, not only like CPD events organized for teachers but also in the "exploratory practices" to be implemented by the teacher. In other words, even if the teacher decides to explore specific aspects of their classroom practices, the exploratory mode is to be suggested by the inspector.

In their answers to the final question of the interview, the inspectors listed a variety of pedagogical topics/issues that can be investigated by teachers independently without direct supervision from them. The suggested topics/issues included "questioning techniques, classroom talk" (I2), "students' motivation and retention, integrating life skills into EFL lessons, raising cultural awareness to enrich the experience of learning a foreign language, etc." (I3). However, linking this variety of choices to the finding on the teachers' familiarity with action research mentioned above (question 17 of the questionnaire), where 69.7% of the surveyed teachers maintained that they were not familiar with this research method, may imply that the variety of topics mentioned by the inspectors is a mere list of possible topics, and not concrete examples on research endeavors led by the teachers and known by the inspectors. This interpretation of the inspectors' answers to the question on the topics/issues that can be explored by teachers independently is further consolidated by one of the inspectors' insistence on "autonomy and

accountability" in one of the answers analyzed earlier, implying that choosing a topic for independent investigation should ultimately receive evaluation from the inspector.

CONCLUSIONS

The study of how Tunisian EFL teachers and inspectors understand CPD shows that both parts link professional growth to the annual preparation plans prepared by the inspectors. The type and frequency of in-service preparation sessions tend to focus on the inspectors' understanding of the teachers' needs based on their inspection work, not on systematic investigations of teachers' needs in different phases of their careers. The preparation delivered to teachers every year does not view them as a heterogeneous group; rather, it presents packages of training topics and strategies thought to suit them all. Besides, the reliance on the inspectors' preparation plans has reduced the teachers' interest in pursuing alternative CPD strategies and limited their understanding of the professional growth they may achieve through self-exploration. Most of them are not familiar with action research, and their reliance on feedback from the inspectors is preventing them from viewing their own teaching as an area for exploration and learning. Finally, although the inspectors proved to have a better understanding of CPD and the role of self-explorations in achieving professional growth, they do not often encourage teachers to engage in authentic autonomous-CPD initiatives. They repeatedly hinted at the importance of guiding teachers in the selection of topics/issues to be investigated or the research method they should adopt.

Given the centralized nature of teacher training in Tunisia, as the form and content of professional-development activities are highly influenced by the teaching and testing methods recommended by the Ministry of Education, decision makers at the central level are called to conduct a systematic evaluation of the common training practices, namely the ones highlighted by the inspectors in this study, to explore alternative ways to encourage EFL teachers to embrace a more active role in fostering their own professional growth.

LIMITATION & FURTHER RESEARCH

Although the study has adopted a mixed-method design to guarantee a higher degree of data validity and reliability, the population sample used for this research has been affected by concerns of accessibility. For example, the three inspectors interviewed for this study belong to three Directorates of Education in the south of the country. The views expressed by this population sample could have been more insightful if the researcher had reached more EFL inspectors in other parts of the country. However, the findings presented in this study can be used as a starting point for further research on EFL teacher preparation in Tunisia, especially since the form and content of the actual training events supervised by the inspectors remain relatively underexplored. Related future research may be ethnographic in nature, relying on external researchers' observations of selected training events to offer more practical insights on the worth of the adopted strategies and techniques in meeting the national goals on teacher preparation.

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