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The Role of Communities of Practice in Developing Yemeni EFL Teachers' Continuous Professional Development

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Keywords

Communities of Practice; Continuous professional development; Role; Yemeni EFL teachers

Abstract

Communities of Practice (CoP) is one effective technique for developing innovative EFL teachers in a world that has witnessed rapid technological changes. Therefore, this investigation measured the perceptions of a group of Yemeni EFL teachers towards the role of Cop in empowering Yemeni EFL teachers' Continuous Professional Development (PCD). The study also aimed to check which component of PCD was perceived as higher among Yemeni EFL teachers. In addition, the study also gauged the impact of gender and years of experience variables on developing CPD components. A quantitative approach was obtained; a self-designed close-ended questionnaire was demonstrated with 54 CoP members who participated in the CoP program sponsored by the British Council in late 2022 and early 2023 in Yemen. The study found that CoP members expressed their high PCD improvement (M=3.90) due to their participation in the CoP program. Results also indicated that engagement received the highest level of improvement among PCD components (M=4.04). Furthermore, no significant differences between the CoP members on the PCD components were attributed to gender or teaching experience. The study recommends the importance of activating communities of practices among EFL teachers to share their ideas and develop their performance.

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الكلمات المفتاحية

مجموعة الممارسة المهنية؛ التطوير المهني المستمر؛ أدوار؛ معلمو اللغة الإنجليزية اليمنيون

الملخص

تعدّ مجموعة الممارسة المهنية إحدى التقنيات الناجحة في تطوير مهارات معلمي اللغة الإنجليزية بصفتها لغة أجنبية بالتزامن مع التطورات التكنولوجية السريعة في العالم؛ لذا قامت هذه الدراسة بقياس إدراك مجموعة من معلمي اللغة الإنجليزية عن دور مجموعة الممارسة المهنية في تمكين التطوير المهني المستمر لمعلي اللغة الإنجليزية. كما هدفت الدراسة إلى تفحُّص أي من مكونات التطوير المهني المستمر كانت أكثر إدراكاً بين معلمي اللغة الإنجليزية اليمنيين. كما قامت الدراسة بقياس أثر متغيري الجنس والخبرة على تطوير مكونات التطوير المهني المستمر للمعلمين. وقد تم استخدام المنهج الكمّي؛ فتم مشاركة استبيان مغلق ذاتي التصميم لـ 54 عضواً من المعلمين اليمنيين والمشاركين في برنامج مجموعة الممارسة المهنية الذي نظمه المجلس الثقافي البريطاني في أواخر عام 2022 م، وأوائل عام2023 م، في اليمن. وأظهرت الدراسة أنَّ المعلِّمين أعربوا عن تحسُّن كبير في التطوير المهني المستمر لهم بمتوسط (3.90) نتيجة مشاركتهم في برنامج الممارسة المهنية. كما أشارت النتائج إلى أنَّ مكوِّن المشاركة حصل على أعلى مستوى من التحسُّن بين مكونات التطوير المهني المستمر بمتوسط (4.04). وعلاوة على ذلك، لم تظهر فروقات كبيرة بين أعضاء مجموعات المعلمين الممارسين فيما يتعلَّق بمكونات التطوير المهني المستمر الأخرى التي تعزى لمتغيرات الجنس أو لسنوات الخبرة التدريسية. وتوصي الدراسة بأهمية تفعيل مجتمعات الممارسة المهنية بين معلِّمي اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية لمشاركة أفكارهم وتطوير أدائهم.

1. Introduction

Innovative EFL teachers are aware of continuously developing themselves to develop great and massive developments in teaching methods and classroom strategies (Bin-Hady, 2019). Teaching a language is a dynamic process where teachers enable themselves to develop their skills and techniques of teaching to cope with the new trends of technological equipment that help students-teachers to raise the par of learning-teaching practice (Eshete & Gezahegn, 2023; Yamin et al., 2022). EFL teachers must change their pedagogical practices and follow standards (David & Bwisa, 2013). One of the best ways of developing EFL teachers' professional development is to participate in communities of practice (henceforth CoP) (Bostancioglu, 2018; Mai et al., 2020; Nematzade et al., 2021; Kourkouli, 2018). Online CoP is perceived as a platform for solving problems, sharing ideas, reflecting, and emotional sharing (Mia et al., 2020). It helps EFL teachers with many tasks to solve problems that could not be solved alone (Duy & Trang, 2022).

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Continuing Professional Development (CPD) is a program where teachers group as professionals to form CoP to build up an effective influence on the teaching-learning process because what was inevitable through the last decade may not be applicable during these recent days (Adey, 2004). Several studies gauged the impact of CoP on developing EFL teachers' CPD. To begin, CPD is a comprehensive approach that involves the various learning activities undertaken by professionals to enhance their skills. It aims to strengthen interpersonal skills throughout a professional's career (Campbell et al., 2010).

Moreover, it enables learning to become conscious of the skills, knowledge, and experience teachers may gain throughout their careers (Vadivel et al., 2021). Furthermore, teachers throughout CPD can share best practice techniques to improve their engagement in the work environment by grouping into one community of practicing. CPD is a long process that begins from the first day of teaching practice till the time of getting retired from the teaching practice (Alibakhsh & Dehvari, 2015). CPD has been investigated in different learning settings. In the Indonesian context, Utami et al. (2019) correlated the involvement of CPD with EFL teachers' perceptions and practices about teaching English effectively. Alshumaimeri and Almohaisen (2017) probed the usefulness of professional development activities in developing Saudi EF teachers' practice in Saudi Arabia. Alibakhshi and Dehvari (2015) examined the main developmental activities that improve Iranian EFL teachers' CPD in Iran. All the studies focused on the impact of CoP on EFL teachers' CPD in general. This study differs from the previous one in probing the role of CoP in developing the components of CPD in the Yemeni context. Furthermore, the lack of studies in the Yemeni context that connect the CoP and CPD of EFL teachers encourages researchers to explore this field. To this respect, the current study aims at finding answers to the following questions:

- To what extent does CoP program empower Yemeni EFL teachers' CPD?
- What component of CPD was perceived the highest amongst Yemeni EFL CoP members?
- Do Yemeni EFL female Cop members develop more CPD than males in CPD components?
- Does teaching experience have a significantly different impact on developing the CPD components of Yemeni EFL CoP members?

2. Literature Review

Innovative teachers are constantly developing and improving themselves and their teaching activities (Angrist & Lavy, 2001; Grosemans et al., 2015; Kyndt et al., 2016). In the last two decades, teachers' CPD has shown a significant growth in the number of studies in various settings (Alibakhshi & Dehvari, 2015; Nasimi & Ghaemi, 2022; Slingerland et al., 2021). The focus was and is still on training teachers to be well-qualified for the teaching-learning process. Teachers' training is necessary for their teaching practice. Training promotes the effectiveness and efficiency of teachers and the

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association as well. Teachers should pass through training programs to help them overcome and solve problems they may face in their teaching practice (Angrist & Lavy, 2001; Kyndt et al., 2016). To ensure the success of any education program, institutions and education leaders must prioritize improvements in three key areas: classroom basic materials, teacher knowledge, and professional skills and competencies.

There should be a balance between teachers' updating and the continuous changes in teaching methods and techniques (Grosemans et al., 2015, Kyndt et al., 2016). Teaching is an interactive activity particularly when it involves effective practice and positive challenges to obtain higher frequency in the teaching-learning process Angrist and Lavy (2001) claim that there should be a positive correlation between a teacher's effective training and students' achievement. Two concepts will be discussed in this review. They are communities of practice and continuous professional development of English language teachers.

2.1 Communities of practice

Meyerhoff and Strycharz (2013) viewed the CoP as a trend that enables teachers to assume various principles about teaching practice. CoP is defined as "groups of people who share a concern, a set of problems, or a passion about a topic, and who deepen their knowledge and expertise in this area by interacting on an ongoing basis" (Wenger et al., 2002, p. 4). CoP theory of learning had been proposed by Wenger (1998) which encouraged learning as a collaborative activity rather than an individual task (Morley, 2016). Many studies have explored the application of CoP theory in education, specifically focusing on EFL contexts (Dowling, 2009; Gil Guevara, 2016; Mai, 2020; Mehdizadeh et al., 2023. Gil Guevara (2016) examined the impact of Cop via social media on 25 Colombian EFL teachers. Findings reported that CoP-mediated technology fosters teachers' CPD in some areas. It boosted teachers' reflection, raised collaboration, and solved problems.

Furthermore, Dowling (2009) explored the impact of online CoP on developing EFL teachers. The study explained how to use the ajarn.com website to develop EFL teachers in the United Arab Emirates. Mai (2020) studied the impact of using online Facebook groups in Vietnam as a CoP for EFL teachers. The study gauged the perceptions of 84 Vietnamese EFL teachers and analyzed the group posts shared within 5 months. The study showed that university teachers shared different ideas and perceptions regarding activities and knowledge than school teachers. The study recommended using social media as a community for teaching practices. Mehdizadeh et al. (2023) also conducted a longitudinal study on the effect of CoP on EFL teachers' identified development at three stages of participant's teaching practice. Findings reported that the teacher constructed three various identities. The participants also shared multiple statuses in the teaching environment.

McArdle and Ackland (2007) stated that learning in an educational setting develops students' achievements. It dynamically correlates with CoP and CPD

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development. In the previous section, we have discussed some studies on the CoP theory in English language learning and teaching. In the next section, EFL teachers' CPD will be gauged.

2.2. EFL teachers' continuous professional development

Continuous Professional Development (CPD) is a process that empowers teachers' classroom management by enhancing learning in real classroom situations and improving classroom learning outcomes (Gray, 2005). This correlates strongly with the learning outcomes of students' and teacher's quality (Slingerland et al., 2021). CPD empowers teachers with new teaching strategies that lead to a change in structured learning activities such as classroom practices, teachers' knowledge, experiences, and learning process engagement (Alibakhshi & Dehvari, 2015; Egert et al., 2018; Fraser et al., 2007; Nasimi & Ghaemi, 2022; Shah, 2011).

CPD becomes effective only if it positively changes teachers' competence, qualifications, and classroom practices (Fraser et al., 2007). However, if such changes are not figured out or not implemented in the classroom, the learning process will not be fully effective. For certain, CPD activities and materials are most effective when they are directly related to teachers' competence, engagement, experiences, and practice (Shah, 2011). CPD involves according to Egert et al. (2018) the "different facilitated learning opportunities to support the acquisition of professional knowledge, skills, and disposition, aimed at the improvement of teaching and, related to this, to beneficial student outcomes" (p. 402).

In the field of EFL, several studies gauged the impact of CPD on teachers' competence (Alibakhshi & Dehvari, 2015; Alshumaimeri & Almohaisen, 2017; Nasimi & Ghaemi, 2022; Utami et al., 2019). Nasimi and Ghaemi (2022) explored how CPD activities successfully improve Iranian EFL teachers' instructing techniques. Additionally, the study investigated the views of EFL instructors on CPD. The study found that English educators participate in various CPD activities. The results suggested that more specific activities could serve as catalysts in developing positive attitudes of EFL educators towards CPD activities. However, Siregar's (2018) findings show that CPD activities do not enable teachers to develop the skill of reflection and action in daily teaching. Moreover, Utami et al. (2019) investigated the connection between activating CPD and the orientation of teachers' interpretation and realization regarding effective English teaching to construct a critical link between theory and practice. The results suggest a partial correlation between activating CPD and teachers' conception and practice alignment. Alshumaimeri and Almohaisen (2017) investigated how useful professional development (PD) activities were to Saudi EFL teachers' teaching practices. According to the results, teachers' most commonly practiced PD activities were exchanging and sharing teaching notes with guides and informally with colleagues. On the other hand, attending conferences in different countries boasts one's CPD.

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The rise in awareness of this topic is the main reason for writing this paper. To the best of the researchers' knowledge, this brief related literature has given prominence to this study as the first to investigate the role of the Communities of Practice program in improving EFL's continuous professional development in Yemen. Furthermore, the previous literature discussed the effect of CoP on EFL CPD in general (Gil Guevara, 2016; Mai, 2020; McArdle & Ackland; 2007 Mehdizadeh et al., 2023), or the activities aligned with CPD (Alibakhshi & Dehvari, 2015; Alshumaimeri & Almohaisen, 2017; Utami et al., 2019). None of the reviewed studies focused on the impact of CoP on the sub-elements of CPD. Likewise, gender and teaching experiences were not assigned in previous studies. This urged us to bridge this gap in the literature in this study.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design and Sample

This quantitative study reports the perceptions of CoP members who participated in a program sponsored by the British Council for four months: from September 2022 into March 2023. Data were collected from the CoP members in April 2023 using a Google Form questionnaire. The CoP program appointed ten Yemeni EFL teachers, who were called CoP leaders, to train members. Each trainer is required to train at least 30 members online whether asynchronously or synchronously. At the end of the program, the researchers sent a questionnaire link to the CoP leaders who shared the link with their CoP members. 54 CoP members (44 females, and 10 males) responded. These participants represented diverse regions across Yemen and possessed varying teaching experience, with the majority having less than five years. They came from both private and public schools. The purpose of the study was explained to the participants. They were told that the questionnaire measures their attitudes about the CoP program they collaborated in and the professional development they gained across the subelements of CoP. Their participation expressed participants' consent. Those interested in the questionnaire while those not interested in participation did not respond. The researchers ensured the anonymity of the participants in which no names were asked to be supplied.

3.2 Research Instrument(s)

A close-ended questionnaire was employed, and the researchers self-prepared it. It collected data from CoP members. The questionnaire was prepared based on the framework of continuous professional development published by the British Council (2015) entitled 'Teaching for Success'. The questionnaire includes two sections. The first consists of three questions enquired about gender, teaching experience, and place of teaching. The second part collected answers about the four components of PCD: foundation, engagement, integration, and specialization. Each element has four items. The questionnaire items are Likert Scale with five alternatives ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree (Appendix 1). To ensure the validity and reliability of the questionnaire, it was sent to three referees in English language teaching to validate its content with the

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purpose of the study. The referees provided their notes which required the modification of some items. The researchers made all the necessary modifications. The questionnaire was then administered in a pilot study to 15 individuals excluded from the final administration. They were asked about the understandability of the items. Internal consistency of the measure was assessed using Cronbach's Alpha (see Table 1). The resulting coefficient of .87 indicates good reliability.

Table 1.

Questionnaire reliability test

Cronbach's Alpha	N of Items
.872	16

3.3 Data collection and Analysis

3.3.1 Data analysis

SPSS was used to analyse the data (Version 23). Several statistical tests were applied including inferential tests like Kolmogorov-Smirnova to check the sample normality of distribution. Table 2 indicates that the two axes i.e., foundation and specialization are normally distributed (Sig. = .043, .002) while the engagement and integration are not normally distributed (Sig= .057, .200). Mann Whitney test and Kruskal Wallis Test were used. Mean scores and standard deviations were also calculated. Therefore, the researchers used the non-parametric test to estimate the differences between the variables.sed the non-parametric test to calculate the differences between the variables.

Table 2.

Normality of sample distribution

	Kolmogorov-Smirnov[a]		
Variables	Statistic	df	Sig.
Foundation	.122	54	.043
Engagement	.118	54	.057
Integration	.094	54	.200*
Specialization	.158	54	.002

4. Results and Discussion

RQ1: To what extent does the CoP program empower Yemeni EFL teachers' CPD?

To answer this question, the cumulative mean and standard deviation were calculated. Table 3 indicates that the CoP participated in empowering EFL teachers' CPD.

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Table 3 results indicate that CoP members perceive the program as highly empowering within their Community of Practice. They scored 3.90 with a Std of .610.

Table 3.

Yemeni EFL teachers' perception on CoP program

Variable	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Professional continuous development	54	3.90	.610

RQ2: What component of CPD was perceived the highest amongst Yemeni EFL CoP members?

Table 4 indicates that engagement was perceived as the highest amongst PCD components. It received the main score of, M= 4.04, Std=.647. Foundation and specialization were perceived with the same perceptions, M=4.01, Std=.743 and M=4.01, Std=.659 respectively. Finally, integration was perceived the least to be developed in the CoP program. It received a mean score of 3.65 and a standard deviation of .682.

Table 4.

Yemeni EFL members' perceptions on the impact of CoP on the components of CPD

Variable	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Foundation	54	4.01	.743
Engagement	54	4.04	.647
Integration	54	3.65	.682
Specialization	54	4.01	.659

RQ3: Do Yemeni EFL female CoP members develop more CPD than males in CPD components?

Table 5 indicates that male and female CoP members reported relative perceptions of their CPD. In the components of foundation and engagement, female CoP members scored higher than male CoP members (M=4.03, Std=.782 and M=4.04, Std=.660) respectively. On the contrary, in the last two components, males scored higher than females. In, integration, males scored, M=3.75, Std =.645 whereas females got, M= 3.63, Std =.695, and in the same in specialization, male CoP members scored, M=4.01, Std =.677 whereas the female cop members scored M=4.02, Std =.606. No significant differences were reached as the Asymp. Sig.(2-tailed) mounted higher than .05.

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Table 5.

Perceptions on the role of CoP program in developing their CPD by gender

CPD variables	Gender	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Z	Asymp. Sig (2-tailed)
Foundation	Female	44	4.03	.782	-.707-	.480
	Male	10	3.92	.565		
Engagement	Female	44	4.04	.660	-.067-	.946
	Male	10	4.02	.617		
Integration	Female	44	3.63	.695	-.674-	.500
	Male	10	3.75	.645		
Specialization	Female	44	4.01	.677	-.034-	.973
	Male	10	4.02	.606		

RQ4: Does teaching experience have a significant impact on developing the CPD components of Yemeni EFL CoP members?

Table 6 shows that the CoP program has no significant difference in of EFL teachers' CPD component development attributable to their teaching experience. Foundation scored .098, engagement amounted to .149, integration scored .147 and specialisation got .073. The Sig value of all four components is higher than the significant value of .05.

Table 6.

Teaching experience impact on developing EFL Yemen CPD teachers

Teaching years of experience	CPD variables	Foundation	Engagement	Integration	Specialization
Less than 5	Main ranks	18.70	19.75	21.00	19.93
6-10		30.46	28.54	28.17	30.04
11-15		15.00	2.50	2.50	5.00
16-20		18.13	19.00	15.13	15.38
21-25		20.38	22.63	20.75	20.13
Chi-Square		7.829	6.755	6.796	8.558
Df		4	4	4	4
Asymp. Sig.		.098	.149	.147	.073

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According to the perceptions of participants in this study, the CoP program, sponsored by the British Council in Yemen between Sep 2022 and March 2023 contributed to developing Yemen EFL teachers' CPD to a great extent. Teachers update their professional and specialist knowledge in new technologies to promote and boost the occupation they are training in, acquire new skills relevant to the field of their specialism, and familiarise themselves with the field in practice. This finding explains the collaboration between the CoP members from one side and with a CoP leader from the other side. They shared ideas in the community. Many previous findings support this finding. To name some, (Dowling, 2009; Gil Guevara, 2016; Hazaea, 2019; Mai, 2020; Mehdizadeh et al., 2023). Gil Guevara (2016) found that CoP-mediated technology fosters Colombian EFL teachers' CPD in some teachers' reflection, raised collaboration, and solved problems. Similarly, Mai (2020) showed that Facebook groups allow teachers to share activities and knowledge on EFL teaching.

The study recommended using social media as a community for teaching practices. Moreover, Mehdizadeh et al. (2023) reported that CoP impacts EFL teachers' identity development. The study also explored the role of CoP in developing the components of EFL teachers' CPD. Findings show that engagement was perceived as the highest sub-component of CPD to be developed. The study revealed that most teachers consider CPD a valuable activity in their professional lives and had positive experiences with CoP. This stands completely against O'Connell's (2010) findings. To him, teachers mostly referred to their past experiences of CPD when expressing their views and opinions. Their perspectives on CPD seldom extended beyond their previous encounters with it. However, the current study explained how CoP boosted the engagement skills of Yemeni EFL teachers as in reality, teachers tend to normalize CPD as a means to address the change (Knight 2002). Foundation and specialization were the second sub-components to be developed. CoP provides teachers with CPD to establish professional links and improve individual specialisation and educational institutions for the training process. Findings reported no differences between the role of CoP in developing EFL teachers attributed to gender or teaching experiences. These findings indicate that both male and female teachers got the same chance to participate in CoP to share their ideas and set their queries about the problems they may face.

This finding is by Bin-Hady et al. (2020) who found that both male and female students in Saudi Arabia and Yemen use technology-based language learning strategies in online settings relatively similarly. Likewise, Zabaniotou et al. (2022) reported that CoP can develop students equally regardless of gender or location. The findings of this study are important to EFL teachers in Yemen r to construct such communities on the district level or the governorate or even a community that constitutes EFL teachers from all over Yemen.

These findings are also important to novice teachers. They can begin developing their teaching practice by communicating with their colleagues and discussing the problems they may face with the suggested solutions. These findings are also important

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for sponsored organisations aiming to help developing countries or countries under war crises. Such organisations can train some teachers as CoP leaders who will train many other teachers nationwide. However, this study's significant findings uncovered some shortcomings in this field.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

Communities of Practice (CoP) is a rich environment where EFL teachers can share their ideas and learn new teaching skills and knowledge. Participating with other members who share the same profession develops the knowledge and skills of both. As each member is autonomous, his/her ideas can be transmitted to the other members and be learned from the autonomy and creativity of other members. Teachers can update their teaching practices and develop their knowledge in the field. They learn skills and abilities that can establish their continuous professional development, leading to more engagement with their students in the learning and teaching process. As suggested, teachers' CPD is only effective when reflected in students' learning outcomes. This study reported that CoP has a great role in developing Yemeni EFL teachers. It participated in developing their level of development stepping from foundation, and engagement to integration and specialization. Teachers pointed out that they gained high development in engagement, i.e., one component of CPD, followed by speciation and integration, another component of CPD, and the last was with foundation. The CoP program has a relative impact on male and female Yemeni EFL CoP members regardless of their teaching experiences. EFL teachers are recommended to work together and help each other, especially in countries where war and corruption leave teachers to struggle alone. This step bridges the lack of teachers' training programs and workshops. CoP is a culture that university professors should motivate, develop, and encourage. They should seed this idea in their college students which would grow among themselves and their students at school can harvest its fruits. The study just adopted a quantitative design, future research studies are encouraged to follow mixed methods. Moreover, the current study assigned CoP members who have access to the Internet connection, there is a call to review the opinions of CoP leaders about the credibility of the CoP program and the content that should be focused on and train the CoP members.

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Appendix (I)

Dear CoP members!

We have a research study which aims to check the role of the training course you received during the previous months under the sponsorship of the British Council on your continuous professional development. The questionnaire consists of four stages of development.

Part 1: Dimorphic information

Please choose one of the alternatives.

A- Your gender:

- Female
- Male

B- Are you working in:

- Private institution
- Public
- Both
- Not working yet

C- Your teaching years of experience:

- Less than 5
- 6-10
- 11-15
- 16-20
- 21-25
- More 25

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Part 2

Please choose the alternative which suits your level of agreement

	Statement	SA	A	N	D	SD
Foundation	The CoP training course developed my knowledge in basic teaching.					
	The CoP training course improved my knowledge of language skills.					
	The CoP training course developed my confidence in teaching.					
	The CoP training course provided me with the knowledge to apply in teaching.					
Engagement	The CoP training course encourages me to participate in teaching online.					
	The CoP training course encourages me to share my knowledge of teaching with others.					
	The CoP training course encourages me to solve problems I face while practising teaching.					
	The CoP training course encourages me to teach in institutes or private schools.					
Integration	Because of participating in the CoP training course, I feel like I am a qualified teacher.					
	Because of participating in the *CoP training course*, I feel l am able to teach professionally.					
	Because of participating in the CoP training course, I feel l do not need extra educational courses any more.					
	Because of participating in the *CoP training course*, I feel I am a model in teaching to others.					
Specialization	The *CoP training course* guided me to provide information to other teachers.					
	The CoP training course guided me to answer any questions from other teachers.					
	The CoP training course guided me to give some advice to teachers when they need.					
	The CoP training course enabled me to give some references to teachers to develop their level of knowledge.					

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Authors' contributions
Dr. Wagdi Rashad Ali Bin-Hady has written the introduction, methodology, results, discussion and conclusion. *Dr. Najat Busabaa* has written the literature review and made a copy editing of the manuscript. *Dr. Lamis Abdullah* has prepared the instrument, collected data and participated in proofreading.

Declaration of conflicting interest
The authors declared no conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of the article.

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