

The Perceived Professional Development among EFL Cambodian Lower Secondary Teachers

Siem Or
The University of Cambodia

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the involvement of Cambodian EFL teachers in decision-making related to professional development in lower secondary schools in Phnom Penh. Using an exploratory research design, data were collected through questionnaires from 40 teachers and semi-structured interviews with six participants. The study examines how Cambodian EFL teachers perceive their role in shaping professional growth activities, including training and workshops. Findings reveal that teachers' participation is minimal, unstructured, and largely directed by top-down decisions. Five major themes emerged: lack of professional development opportunities, limited systematic and customized involvement, inadequate professional tools, insufficient institutional support, and teachers' discontent with their growth prospects. These issues contribute to a weak professional learning culture and a sense of exclusion. This study contributes to understanding teacher agency and professional growth in developing contexts. It emphasizes the need for systemic reform in educational policy and school leadership to foster more inclusive, collaborative, and teacher-centered professional development systems that enhance motivation, agency, and educational outcomes. Future research should include focus groups to gain deeper insights and expand across different regions and types of schools, thereby providing a more comprehensive understanding of teacher involvement in decision-making.

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Corresponding Author:

Siem Or
Faculty of Educational Sciences, University of Cambodia, Phnom Penh, Cambodia
Email: or.siem@moeys.gov.kh

1. INTRODUCTION

Global citizenship education highlights the growing interconnectivity of individuals and nations [1]. Teachers are crucial in preparing students for global challenges, yet professional development often lags behind these evolving demands [2], [3], [4], [5].

In Cambodia, following years of civil conflict, education reforms have prioritized rebuilding the teaching profession to align with international standards [3], [6]. English language proficiency has become vital for both education and employment, reflecting

Cambodia's integration into the global community [6], [7], [8]. Consequently, the professional growth and readiness of teachers are paramount for enhancing education in an interconnected world, enabling them to adapt to unforeseen events such as the COVID-19 pandemic [9].

Professional development is a cornerstone of teacher professionalism, but faces persistent challenges. Evans [10] asserts that effective professional development must be intrinsically motivated, stemming from personal reflection rather than imposed behavioral changes, and distinguishes three key components of professionalism: behavioral, attitudinal, and intellectual. Critics argue against externally imposed, top-down approaches [11], [12], as these methods restrict teacher autonomy and often fail to address their diverse needs, contexts, and motivations. Successful professional development depends on supportive environments, adequate resources, collaboration, and teacher agency [13].

Furthermore, the absence of continuing professional development (CPD) will hinder teachers and staff from becoming well-educated and knowledgeable resources [14]. For example, during the COVID-19 pandemic, teachers were not well-trained and had limited experience using digital devices, which made them seem unfamiliar with them [15]. In contrast, inclusive and collegial approaches that empower teachers to participate actively in decision-making and professional learning are advocated [16], [17], [18]. Teacher collegiality [12], [19], [20], [21], [22] is considered essential for fostering mutual learning, emotional support, and intellectual growth, with studies indicating that collegial environments facilitate the sharing of experiences, the gaining of new ideas, and the development of stronger professional identities [23], [24]. Collaborative learning environments such as Professional Learning Communities [20], [25], [26], [27] and Professional Development Schools [28], [29] are considered ideal for sustained professional growth, fostering teamwork, reflection, action research, and shared decision-making, enabling teachers to improve instructional practices and develop their voices as educators and researchers. Overall, theorists agree that meaningful professional development is collaborative, reflective, and context-sensitive, relying on teachers' active engagement rather than external control [10], [12], [16], [30].

This study examined the perceptions of Cambodian EFL lower secondary teachers regarding their involvement in professional development activities. Guided by the research question, "What do Cambodian EFL lower secondary teachers perceive about their involvement in professional development activities?", this study aimed to understand teachers' engagement, opportunities, and challenges in their professional growth. The findings provide insights into how teachers experience and value professional development within Cambodia's English language teaching context.

2. METHOD

This study employed a sequential explanatory mixed-methods design, where qualitative interviews were conducted and analyzed first, followed by quantitative data collection and analysis via questionnaires. The rationale for combining these methods was that interviews allowed for more profound, nuanced insights into teachers' experiences and perceptions of professional development, while questionnaires provided broader validation

and generalizability of the interview findings across a larger sample. This approach allowed the study to capture teachers' perceptions of professional growth opportunities, challenges, and engagement within the Cambodian EFL context.

For the interviews, participants (n = 6) were informed of the objectives, topics, and confidentiality procedures beforehand, and each session lasted between 30 and 60 minutes [31]. These teachers had an average of 7 years of experience teaching EFL, with roughly an equal gender representation. The interview questions were reviewed by two experienced researchers in the field of language education to ensure clarity and relevance. Questionnaires were distributed to 34 teachers who did not participate in the interviews to avoid duplication and to gather additional perspectives from a more diverse group. The questionnaire items were developed based on a thorough review of relevant literature and were piloted with a small group of EFL teachers (n = 5) to assess clarity and face validity. These pilot questionnaires were assessed and updated accordingly. The questionnaires were designed to be clear, concise, and completed within 30 minutes, with an emphasis on confidentiality and voluntary participation [32].

Documentary data, such as teachers' job descriptions and institutional guidelines, were also collected to examine the formal opportunities for professional growth. Data analysis followed the qualitative framework outlined in Miles and Huberman [33], encompassing data reduction, display, and interpretation. Interview transcripts were coded using NVivo 12 to identify themes related to professional development [34]. Questionnaire responses were analyzed using SPSS 26, with descriptive statistics (means, standard deviations, frequencies) calculated to summarize the data. Thematic patterns from questionnaire responses were then compared with interview findings to validate and enrich the data. For example, if interviewees consistently reported a lack of collaborative opportunities, the questionnaire data were examined to see if a similar pattern emerged regarding teachers' perceptions of collaboration. Documentary data were analyzed to compare the formal provisions for professional development with teachers' reported experiences, creating a triangulation matrix to identify alignment or discrepancies between these different data sources. Specifically, the matrix facilitated comparison of the formal expectations, interview experiences, and quantitative support provided by the SPSS system. This iterative cross-validation process helped to increase confidence in the study's findings.

Table 1. Summary of Research Participant Selection

Stage and Instrument	Sampling	Selection Criteria	Participants
Qualitative Stage: Semi-structured Interviews	Purposive Sampling	Highly qualified and more experienced Cambodian EFL teachers	6
Quantitative Stage: Questionnaires	Non-Probability. Convenient Sampling	Cambodian EFL teachers who did not participate in interviews	40

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This study explored teachers' involvement in professional development activities and identified five key themes: (1) limited availability of professional development

activities, (2) lack of systematic and personalized participation, (3) insufficient professional tools, (4) inadequate support, and (5) teachers' dissatisfaction with their professional growth opportunities. The findings suggest that teachers are generally passive participants in their own professional development.

3.1 Lack of Professional Development Activities

Table 2. Professional Development Activities

Area of Involvement	Level / Extent of Involvement	Sample Extracts / Reasons	No. of Mentions
Deciding about professional development activities/policy	Passive involvement	Ratha No. I do not participate because discussions do not come to us	3
		Rotana I would love to be involved.	
		Thida restricted to attending	

When Ratha, as shown in Table 2 above, stated that he does not engage since teachers are not allowed to participate in talks, it was evident that he plays a passive role in the school's professional development decisions. Ratha described how teachers were required to participate in professional development days and how these initiatives were implemented in the workplace. He said: In schools, professional development occurs when teachers are not granted vacation time while kids are on holiday. The purpose of keeping teachers in is to keep them occupied. The purpose of our visit is professional growth (Ratha, Interview).

Rotana voiced his great desire to be more "involved in my institutional professional development either as an organizer... or... hopefully as a decision maker" in order to draw attention to his exclusion from making decisions regarding professional development policies. Thida clarified that he only participated in extremely restricted professional development activities that did not entail decision-making. He stated that "my involvement is just restricted to attending different workshops within...the school." Bopha, who admitted to being a member of a group planning an institutional conference, was the lone exception. He clarified that his motivation for getting involved was self-motivated and mentioned, "I became associated with a committee for the first time, albeit I am not sure what the committee is for exactly." I believe it has to do with the location for the upcoming convention (Bopha, Interview).

As seen in Table 3 below, the results from the questionnaire support the conclusions drawn from the interviews.

Table 3. Teachers' Involvement in Adapting Teaching Materials from a Questionnaire

Area of Involvement	The Surveyed Questionnaires (n = 40)				
	1	2	3	4	5
Involvement in deciding about the professional development activities in my workplace.	19 (47.5%)	10 (25%)	5 (12.5%)	3 (7.5%)	3 (7.5%)
	72,5%			15%	
Involvement in deciding about the themes and procedures of the professional development days in the school.	17 (42.5%)	14 (35%)	6 (15%)	0	3 (7.5%)
	77,5%			7%	

Note: 1 = Strongly Disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = No Opinion, 4 = Agree, 5 = Strongly Agree

According to the findings, 29 teachers, or 72.5% of the total, believe they were not involved in choosing the school's professional development programs (10 disagree and 19 severely disagree). Furthermore, a comparable proportion of 77.5% (14 disagree and 17 strongly disagree) feel that they had little say in choosing the topics and protocols of the school's professional development activities.

3.2 Lack of Systematic and Customized Involvement in Professional Development Activities

The interviews revealed that teachers' participation in professional development activities is often unsystematic, irregular, or not tailored to their individual needs.

Table 4. Systematic and Customized Involvement in Professional Development

Area of Involvement	Level of Involvement	Sample Extracts /Reasons	No. of Mentions
Group discussions	- Absence of involvement - Unsystematic	Ratha Not existing	5
		Socheat Things like that do not exist.	
		Rotana Little discussion, but not systematic	
		Sreytouch Sometimes... spontaneously	
		Thida Yes, [while] reflecting on lessons	
Reflection sessions on lessons	- Unsystematic - Individualized	Ratha That does not exist.	6
		Socheat Among the specific teams	
		Rotana On an individual level.	
		Thida Reflecting on lessons within groups	
		Bopha I keep an archive - individual.	
Co-planning	Absence of co-planning	Sreytouch Spontaneous	4
		Ratha That does not exist.	
		Socheat That does not really happen.	
		Rotana No co-planning	
		Bopha Usually, I don't	
Collaborative action research	- Absence of collaborative action research - Individual initiatives	Ratha At the personal level	6
		Socheat Never	
		Rotana Collaborative. We do not do research.	
		Thida I did not have the chance to do action research.	
		Bopha My own research.	
Co-teaching	Absence of co-teaching	Sreytouch An individual in my classroom.	6
		Ratha Does not exist	
		Socheat Zero capability for co-teaching	
		Rotana No co-teaching is going on.	
		Thida just attending others' classes.	
Mentoring	Unsystematic	Bopha No. Never done it	4
		Sreytouch Observation more than mentoring	
		Ratha At a personal level	
		Socheat On a friendly basis, not institutional	
		Rotana Been mentored by others	
Professional dialogue	Individualized Unsystematic	Sreytouch I am not doing mentoring.	3
		Socheat No other than this particular instance and a few others [this interview]	
		Thida Professional dialogue takes place spontaneously.	

The interviews revealed that teachers primarily had to learn on their own, with limited support from organized training. Most teachers reported that they did not engage in

activities such as planning lessons together, teaching together, seeking help from mentors, reflecting on their lessons after teaching, discussing ideas in groups, or conducting research with others. For example, Rotana said he did not often talk to other teachers in a group, and when they did, it was just a quick chat during a meeting. It was not planned out. Sreytouch agreed, saying group talks just happened by chance, not because they were scheduled. Thida also said that when teachers discussed their work, it was often random and not part of a plan. Overall, the interviews revealed that teachers lacked a systematic approach for learning and improving together. Ratha explained that when teachers help each other, it is simply a friendly gesture and not part of any official school program. She said she sometimes asks friends for advice, and they give her tips. This helps her, but there is no formal mentoring system in place at the school.

Most of the teachers interviewed stated that they did not have access to organized training opportunities. Ratha said they did not have group talks, lesson reviews, planning sessions, or collaborative teaching. Another teacher, Socheat, agreed, saying, "There is no planning together." Rotana also said there was no co-planning, agreeing with Ratha and Socheat. Essentially, they all stated that they did not plan and work together much.

Other teachers agreed with Ratha about the lack of co-teaching (teaching together). Rotana said, like Socheat, that "there is no co-teaching" because of scheduling problems. Besides not teaching together, the teachers also did not do research together. Rotana stated that they did not conduct "collaborative" research because they did not honestly believe in the value of research at the time. Bopha added that "it is hard to work with others" on research, so she conducted her own research independently.

Bopha said that most teachers at the school try to improve on their own, without much organized help. The interviews revealed that, since there were no official training programs, teachers had to devise their own methods for learning. For example, Rotana said, "Each person thinks about their lessons by themselves. There is no group to think about it together." Ratha also said that even though the school did not have organized ways for teachers to talk to each other about their work or do research together, some teachers still did these things on their own: "Yes, I do it myself, but the school does not make it happen. The school does not have teams of teachers doing research or offering training programs."

Bopha explained that the inability ¹ to coordinate with others to perform collective action research was the reason he chose to carry out his own independent study.

The results from the interview, as shown in Table 5 below, are supported by the questionnaire results. As demonstrated in Table 5, the interviewees' opinions regarding their involvement in professional development activities are supported by the teachers' answers. The findings indicate that not all educators participated in organized professional development events. Six teachers (15%) and just three teachers (7.5%) highly believe that they participated in structured and methodical group discussions at work. Furthermore, three educators and four teachers concur that they participated in the methodical co-planning.

Additionally, eight teachers believe they are involved in reflection on lessons learned at work (3 strongly agree and 5 agree). Only three teachers also think that they are

engaged in collaborative action research at their school. Finally, eleven teachers, or fifty percent, feel that they were not involved in professional discourse (five disagree and fifteen strongly disagree).

Table 5. Teachers' Involvement in Adapting Teaching Materials from the Questionnaire

The Surveyed Questionnaires (n = 40)					
Area of Involvement	1	2	3	4	5
Involvement in systematic and organized group discussions.	10 (25%)	15 (37.5%)	6 (15%)	6 (15%)	3 (7.5%)
Involvement in the systematic and organized reflection sessions on lessons.	11 (27.5%)	18 (45%)	3 (7.5%)	5 (12.5%)	3 (7.5%)
Involvement in co-planning.	9 (22.5%)	20 (50%)	4 (10%)	4 (10%)	3 (7.5%)
Involvement in conducting collaborative action research.	6 (15%)	8 (20%)	23 (57.5%)	0	3 (7.5%)
Involvement in professional dialogue.	15 (37.5%)	5 (12.5%)	6 (15%)	14 (35%)	0

Note: 1 = Strongly Disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = No Opinion, 4 = Agree, 5 = Strongly Agree

3.3 Lack of Professional Tools

As shown in Table 6 below, the interview results indicate that there are no resources available to support teachers' professional development.

Table 6. Professional Tools

Area of Involvement	Existence of Tool + Type of Involvement	Sample Extracts /Reasons	No. of Mentions
Teacher Network	Absence of teacher networks Unsystematic and Individualized involvement	Ratha: That does not exist	5
		Rotana: Done on an individual level. It is not systematic.	
		Thida: I am a member...teachers online.	
		Bopha: No opportunity for that.	
		Sreytouch: No...but teachers involved in the English proficiency test	
Study Groups	Absence of study groups, Unsystematic participation	Ratha: That does not exist	4
		Socheat: Study groups, for instance, do not exist either, due to a lack of funding, interest, space, time, or the allocation of instructors to develop them.	
		Rotana: It is not systematic.	
		Sreytouch: Study groups? Occasionally	
Book Club	Absence of book clubs, Individualized initiatives	Ratha: We do not even have books in the library	4
		Socheat: Book clubs, things like that, do not exist.	
		Bopha: I am trying to get a book club.	
		Sreytouch: I do not really think we have a book club here.	

In response to a query about book clubs at work, Ratha said, "There is not one." I do not see it as existing, thus I do not do that. There are no books in the library at all. Without a library at your university, how can you create a reading club? (Ratha, Interview).

After confirming Ratha's claim, Socheat explained the possible causes of some tools' absence, saying: Once more, there are no study groups, book clubs, or the like in this workplace due to a lack of financing, enthusiasm, space, time, or instructors to support it (Socheat, Interview).

Even though they did not receive good training at school, some teachers, like Rotana and Thida, tried to help themselves. Rotana said they only had teacher groups when teachers did it on their own. Thida said she was part of a teacher group online. Bopha said she was even trying to start a book club for her students, demonstrating her desire to help, despite the challenges she faced.

As seen in Table 7 below, the majority of instructors who answered the questionnaire were convinced that having professional tools was essential, confirming the lack of these materials that interviewees had pointed out.

Table 7. Teachers' Involvement in Adapting Teaching Materials from the Questionnaire

Necessity of Professional Tools	The Surveyed Questionnaires (n=40)				
	1	2	3	4	5
We should have a teacher network in our school.	2 (5%) 5%	0	2 (5%)	18 (45%) 90%	18 (45%)
Teachers should have study groups in their workplace.	2 (5%) 5%	0	4 (10%)	22 (55%) 85%	12 (30%)
Teachers should have a book club in their school.	4 (10%) 15%	2 (5%)	4 (10%)	17 (42.5%) 75%	13 (32.5%)

Note: 1 = Strongly Disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = No Opinion, 4 = Agree, 5 = Strongly Agree

According to the questionnaire's results, thirty teachers, or 75% of the sample, believe that their workplace should have book clubs (13 strongly agree and 17 agree), and thirty-three teachers, or 85%, believe that there should be study groups for teachers (12 strongly agree and 22 agree). Additionally, 36 teachers, or 90%, believe that they should have teacher networks (18 strongly agree and 18 agree). Teachers' desire for these professional resources supports respondents' claims that they lack the necessary resources for professional growth.

3.4 Lack of support

As indicated in Table 8 below, the results of the interviews demonstrate that the administrative and financial support provided to the schools is haphazard and selective. The results of the interviews indicate a lack of structured financial assistance for teachers' professional development. Teachers' individual efforts to advance their careers surfaced despite the lack of organized funding. For instance, Ratha stated that he either sponsors himself or seeks sponsors because his institute did not offer any financial assistance. Similarly, Bopha said, "I paid out of my pocket, I put receipts, and I was not reimbursed," after the institute refused to help him cover the cost of conferences and seminars.

Sreytouch clarified, “None, never,” concurring with Ratha and Bopha that the institute did not support their participation in workshops and conferences. “You are not helping me. I go every year and pay for it myself.” Other respondents, in contrast to Ratha, Bopha, and Sreytouch, acknowledged the help provided by their school, but they emphasized the disparate experiences they had with it. For instance, Socheat stated that “the institute offered reimbursement of fees” and acknowledged getting financial support. Sreytouch emphasized the school’s selective and haphazard approach to funding provision, saying: ‘Though they don’t fund everyone, the institute occasionally selects a small group and provides funding to them.’ It is not methodical. Unfortunately, this is not done frequently. As for the institute, they rarely pay, and if you try to go, you are denied entry unless you are prepared to battle for it (Sreytouch, Interview).

Table 8. Area of Supports

Area of Support	Type of Support from School	Sample Extracts /Reasons	No. of Mentions
Fees	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Unsystematic - Selective - Individualized initiatives 	Ratha No, nothing. I either sponsor myself or I get my own sponsors from outside.	5
		Socheat The school offered reimbursement of fees.	
		Rotana It is not a systematic thing.	
		Bopha I paid out of my pocket.	
		Sreytouch and on my own pocket.	
		Ratha No nothing.	
Transportation	Unsystematic	Socheat The school provided travel for the conference.	4
		Thida There is transportation	
		Sreytouch None, never	

Some interviewees highlighted the type of administrative support they receive at professional gatherings in addition to the haphazard cash support. They concur that having a flexible teaching schedule during conferences was encouraged. Sreytouch agreed that having a flexible schedule at one of the conferences was helpful, even if she did not receive any funding. She clarified that his promotion of the institute was the reason he received assistance, saying: The one assistance I have received in the past was that I was granted time off to do a presentation, and you can be certain that they were adequate because they sort of promoted the location by asking about your background and discussing your job (Sreytouch, Interview).

According to Socheat, who concurred with Sreytouch regarding the school’s practical regulation, “the institute was happy enough to put their name on it but pretty much nothing else” during one of the professional events, even though the management backing was a little weak.

As shown in Table 9 below, the questionnaire’s results support the conclusions drawn from the interviews and highlight the school’s lack of assistance. According to the results from the questionnaire, 34 teachers, or 85%, believe that the school needs to provide additional assistance for teachers (20 strongly agree and 14 agree). Additionally, the results show that 70% of instructors said the school did not cover their conference fees,

while four professors (10%) reported receiving financial assistance to cover conference and workshop fees. Furthermore, 70% of teachers said that the institution did not cover their conference and workshop transportation costs, while four teachers confirmed that they were assisted with these costs. Thirteen instructors (four strongly agreeing and nine agreeing), or 32.5% of the total, reported having benefited from the privilege of being excused from teaching and given the day off for conferences and workshops.

Table 9. Teachers' Involvement in Adapting Teaching Materials from the Questionnaire The Surveyed Questionnaires (n=40)

Area of Support	1	2	3	4	5
Financial support: covering conference fees.	20 (50%)	8 (20%)	8 (20%)	4 (10%)	0
	70%			10%	
Financial support: covering transportation fees.	19 (47.5%)	9 (22.5%)	8 (20%)	4 (10%)	0
	70%			10%	
Administrative support: exempting teachers from teaching during workshop and conference days.	11 (27.5%)	8 (20%)		9 (22.5%)	4 (10%)
	47.5%		8 (20%)	32.5%	
The school should be more supportive of teachers.	0	6 (15%)	0	14 (35%)	20 (50%)
	15%			85%	

3.5 Teachers' Discontent with their Profession in Professional Development Activities

According to the results of the interviews, as indicated in the table below, two-thirds of the teachers expressed dissatisfaction with their involvement in professional development activities.

Table 10. Teachers' discontent with their Professional in PD Activities

Area of Involvement	Extent of Satisfaction	Sample Extracts /Reasons	No. of Mentions
Professional development	Dissatisfaction	Socheat	Dissatisfied.
		Rotana	I do not think I am doing much.
		Sreytouch	Restricted in terms of ...time and... finances.
		Ratha	There is not any policy that accords the opportunity.
		Thida	Frankly speaking, it is not excellent, but you can say it is fair.
		Bopha	Eh, great, I'd like to say.
			4
			2

Other interviewees voiced their displeasure, with the exception of Thida, who thought his involvement was fair, and Bopha, who gave it a "great, I'd like to say" rating. For instance, Socheat described his involvement in professional development activities as "extremely bitter" and said, "I would have to say that I'm a little disappointed." In my opinion, there is very little professional progress. In agreement with Socheat, the other interviewees emphasized their own efforts to advance their careers without consistent institutional assistance. Ratha even brought up the subject of discrimination-based exclusion: I take part in professional development programs when I recognize them,

but they are conducted at the institutional level. I don't participate in professional development programs since there isn't a policy that provides foreign instructors, in particular, with the opportunity to do so (Ratha, Interview).

Furthermore, Rotana and Sreytouch, the other interviewees, believe that their involvement was inadequate. "I don't think I am doing much," Rotana said, explaining that his participation fell short of his expectations due to a lack of time and assistance. "I wish I had more time to accomplish more. I wish my institution had given me the encouragement I needed to accomplish more." Similar to this, Sreytouch conveyed his displeasure and his wish for further involvement but felt constrained by time and financial constraints.

As shown in Table 11 below, the questionnaire results show teachers' discontent with their involvement and correlate with the findings of the interviews:

Table 11. Teachers' Involvement in Adapting Teaching Materials from a Questionnaire The Surveyed Questionnaires (n = 40)

	1	2	3	4	5
Satisfaction with the professional development activities.	18 (45%)	10 (25%)	4 (10%)	8 (20%)	0
	70%			20%	
I function in a professional environment.	7 (17.5%)	9 (22.5%)	7 (17.5%)	10 (25%)	7 (17.5%)
	40%			42.5%	

Note: 1 = Strongly Disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = No Opinion, 4 = Agree, 5 = Strongly Agree

Even though 17 teachers (7 strongly agree and 10 agree), or 42.5% of the total, feel that they operate in a professional setting, according to the results in the above table, only eight teachers (20%) said they were satisfied with the professional development activities at work, while 70% said they were not.

3.6 Teachers' Desires: Greater Involvement

As shown in Table 12 below, the results of the interviews indicate that teachers' discontent with their involvement in professional development activities did not deter them from expressing a desire to be more involved.

All interviewees expressed a desire for more active roles in professional development activities, as shown in the above table. "I would like to have a good participation in terms of setting the policy for professional development," Ratha said, expressing his wish to have a greater say in decisions about the professional development policy at work. Bopha and Sreytouch yearned for greater engagement and active participation in professional growth, as shown in the table above. Rotana criticized his workplace's decision-makers for their lack of professionalism, saying, "I wish we had experts making decisions." We need someone who knows what education is, why it is necessary, and who stays in contact and is continuously nourished by the infrastructure that is, the teachers and students (Rotana, Interview).

Rotana also mentioned that he wanted to learn from his coworkers and share his experience. Socheat wished to be only a participant who might learn new things, much like Rotana. Lastly, to attend professional development activities, Thida desired greater financial support from the school, as well as more positive involvement.

Table 12. Teachers' Desires

Area of Involvement	Desires	Sample Extracts /Reasons	No. of Mentions
Professional development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Good, active, and positive involvement - Sharing experience - Having professional decision makers - Support - More involvement 	Ratha Setting the policy.	6
		Socheat As a participant, nothing more than this. I'd rather be the one learning something.	
		Rotana I would like to share my experience and learn from my colleagues. I wish we had professional decision makers.	
		Thida The role I am looking for one that will allow me to participate positively, or better than I am now. The school [should] provide accommodation [to] facilitate things for me so that I can join such professional development sessions.	
		Bopha I'd like to have more professional development in general...I'd love to be more involved.	
		Sreytouch I'd like to do more, but I am restricted. You have to be your own advocate. If I see something interesting, I go and explore.	

Questionnaires also revealed that interviewees desired greater engagement and active participation in professional development. Participants sought increased access to professional resources, greater involvement in professional activities, and more input into policy decisions. Table 13 below displays these wishes.

The questionnaire data reinforced teachers' aspirations for greater agency and career advancement. Concerning decision-making, a significant majority (80%) of teachers (n = 32) expressed a desire for increased involvement in selecting professional development activities, with 72.5% (n = 29) advocating for full participation (16 strongly agreed, 13 agreed). Beyond decision-making, the survey results highlighted a strong preference among teachers for access to resources that facilitate professional growth. For instance, 80% of respondents (n = 32) (14 strongly agreed, 18 agreed) indicated that their workplace should foster study groups and book clubs. Furthermore, a notable 90% (n = 36) believed in the importance of developing teacher networks (18 strongly agreed, 18 agreed). Finally, 70% (n = 29) (11 strongly agreed, 18 agreed) supported the implementation of mentorship programs pairing experienced teachers with novices, and 72.5% (n = 29) (13 strongly agreed, 16 agreed) felt that decision-makers should support co-teaching.

Table 13. Teachers' Involvement in Adapting Teaching Materials from the Questionnaire

Area of Involvement	Desires: More Involvement and Provision of Tools	1	2	3	4	5
Professional Tools	Have teacher networks.	2 (5%) 5%	0	2 (5%)	18 (45%)	18 (45%) 90%
	Having study groups.	2 (5%) 5%	0	4 (10%)	21 (52.5%)	13 (32.5%) 85%
	Having book clubs.	2 (5%) 10%	2 (5%)	4 (10%)	18 (45%)	14 (35%) 80%
Professional Activities	Involvement in mentoring new teachers.	2 (5%) 15%	4 (10%)	5 (12.5%)	16 (40%)	13 (32.5%) 72.5%
	Encouraging co-teaching.	2 (5%) 20%	6 (15%)	4 (10%)	17 (42.5%)	11 (27.5%) 70%
Decision-making	More involvement in deciding about the professional development activities.	2 (5%) 10%	2 (5%)	4 (10%)	14 (35%)	18 (45%) 80%
	Full involvement in deciding about professional development activities.	0	3 (7.5%)	8 (20%)	13 (32.5%)	16 (40%) 72.5%

Note: 1 = Strongly Disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = No Opinion, 4 = Agree, 5 = Strongly Agree

4. DISCUSSION

The findings reveal that English language teachers in Cambodian lower secondary schools have minimal involvement in determining professional development policies or activities, as these decisions are primarily made by school administrators and the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport (MoEYS). Teachers' needs and interests are rarely considered, and professional development programs are often scheduled during student breaks, which limits their rest time and reduces their motivation to participate. This lack of teacher voice and ownership reflects findings from previous studies emphasizing that effective professional development requires teacher participation in planning and decision-making [10], [12], [30]. Additionally, the study found that opportunities such as discussion forums, reflective practice, teacher networks, study groups, and collaborative research were largely absent, aligning with the argument of Clement and Vandenberghe [21] and Tam [20] that collegial environments are essential for meaningful professional learning. Support for attending professional events, such as conferences and seminars, was found to be inconsistent and limited to a small number of teachers, indicating a lack of systematic structure and equitable access. Similar to Evan [10] and Waring and Evans [16], this study suggests that external, top-down approaches limit teacher autonomy and engagement in their professional development. Consequently, Cambodian EFL teachers expressed dissatisfaction with their professional development opportunities, reflecting a need for more inclusive, collaborative, and well-supported systems that promote sustained teacher learning and empowerment [17], [20], [25].

It is noteworthy that Cambodian PD structures, while facing similar resource constraints, exhibit some key differences compared to other ASEAN contexts. For

example, while Vietnam has seen increased efforts to integrate technology into PD initiatives, Cambodia's infrastructure limitations often hinder such advancements. In contrast, Thailand has decentralized PD decision-making to regional education offices, providing more context-specific approaches, a model absent in the current Cambodian system. The prevalent top-down decision-making observed in Cambodia also raises concerns about teacher agency. Research suggests that school leadership styles have a substantial impact on teacher motivation and professional development. The hierarchical structures observed in many Cambodian schools, where principals exercise significant control, stand in contrast to distributed leadership models, which share decision-making among teachers and administrators, potentially fostering a more collaborative and supportive environment.

Based on these findings, several actionable recommendations can be made: Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport (MoEYS): MoEYS should mandate and support the establishment of school-based PD committees comprised of teachers and administrators to ensure that PD activities align with teachers' needs and interests. This should involve budgeting for ongoing professional development. The Ministry should ensure the budget is sustainable and sufficient. School principals should adopt distributed leadership models that empower teachers to participate in decision-making processes. Administrators should collaborate with teachers to identify opportunities for them to meet with other teachers and share best practices. This should include release time, funding for collaborative activities, and encouraging teachers to implement innovative teaching methods.

Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) can play a crucial role in providing targeted support to Cambodian schools by facilitating teacher networks, organizing workshops on collaborative teaching practices, and offering training in needs assessment and data-driven decision-making. NGOs should evaluate the impact of the intervention with the help of an external consultant. Additionally, administrators must consider the need for these professional development systems.

These insights highlight the urgency of reforming PD frameworks in Cambodian lower secondary schools to balance accountability with teacher empowerment, fostering a system that not only meets national standards but also cultivates teacher motivation, collaboration, and sustained professional growth.

5. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the findings reveal that Cambodian EFL lower secondary teachers experience significantly limited involvement in professional development planning and activities, with decisions primarily dictated by school leaders and the MoEYS, often neglecting teachers' expressed needs and interests. The absence of a well-defined structure, equitable opportunities, and adequately supportive environments has resulted in diminished participation and widespread dissatisfaction among teachers. Professional development is often characterized as disorganized and selective, thereby failing to provide teachers with sufficient avenues for collaboration, reflective practice, and meaningful professional growth. This study underscores the urgency of embedding teacher agency within Cambodia's PD framework, highlighting the need for systemic reforms that prioritize

teacher voice and collaborative structures to foster meaningful and sustainable professional growth.

To address these shortcomings, the following policy recommendations are offered: school leadership should institutionalize structured, teacher-driven PD initiatives; establish formal Teacher Learning Communities (PLCs); implement mentorship pairing systems; introduce funding policies for PD participation; and encourage MoEYS collaboration with universities [31]. Critical reflection on this study identifies key directions for future research, including the use of focus group interviews to more deeply explore teachers' perspectives and broadening the scope to examine teachers' involvement in decision-making across diverse regions and school types within Cambodia.

Beyond its specific context, this study offers valuable insights applicable to other post-conflict educational systems and contributes to the broader literature on teacher professional development in Southeast Asia. By highlighting the detrimental effects of top-down, inflexible PD structures and emphasizing the importance of teacher agency and collaborative learning, this research provides a framework for understanding and addressing similar challenges in other contexts where educational systems are undergoing reform. The findings suggest that empowering teachers to actively participate in shaping their professional growth is not only beneficial for individual teacher motivation and well-being but also essential for fostering a more effective and equitable education system as a whole.

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