Exploring Chinese EFL pre-service teachers' perceptions of self-directed professional development: The benefits and challenges disclosed

YONGXIANG WANG

YONGLIANG WANG (Corresponding author)

Nanjing Normal University, China

ABSTRACT: Teaching has long been regarded as a demanding and complicated job, in which teachers play a vital role. To be effective and successful in this profession, they need to constantly engage in professional development programs. However, such programs are mostly externally driven with teachers playing passive roles. Against this pitfall, self-directed professional development (SDPD) has recently captured the attention of educational researchers. Yet, the benefits and challenges of SDPD in pre-service programs are unknown in EFL contexts. To fill this gap, this study used a semi-structured interview with 50 Chinese pre-service teachers regarding their perceptions of this mode of professional development. The findings of thematic analysis obtained by MAXQDA software (v. 2022) revealed that the most frequent benefits of SDPD were being "needs-based" and "self-directed", which, in turn, produce "flexibility", "autonomy", and "professional knowledge development" in teachers. Concerning the challenges in implementing SDPD, "lack of professional interaction/assistance" from external forces and being "labor-intensive" for teachers were posed most frequently by the participants. Despite these complexities, most of the Chinese pre-service teachers (82%) preferred self-directed and self-initiated PD given their potential and effectiveness. The study encourages EFL educators to revisit their perspectives, plans, and strategies regarding professionalism and professional development.
Keywords: professional development, EFL teacher, pre-service teacher, self-directed professional development

Exploración de las percepciones de los profesores en formación chinos sobre el desarrollo profesional autodirigido: Beneficios y retos revelados.

RESUMEN: El La enseñanza se ha considerado como un trabajo exigente y complicado en que los docentes desempeñan un papel vital. Para ser efectivos y exitosos, los maestros deben participar en programas de desarrollo profesional (DP). Sin embargo, tales programas son principalmente impulsados con roles pasivos. El desarrollo profesional autodirigido (SDPD) ha llamado la atención de los investigadores. Los beneficios y desafíos del SDPD en programas de pre-servicio se desconocen en el contexto chino de EFL. Este estudio adoptó una entrevista semiestructurada con 50 futuros maestros chinos sobre el SDPD. Los hallazgos obtenidos por MAXQDA (Versión 2022) revelaron que los beneficios más frecuentes del SDPD eran ser "basado en necesidades" y "autodirigido", lo que produce "flexibilidad", "autonomía" y "desarrollo del conocimiento profesional" en los docentes. Con respecto a los

desafíos en implementar SDPD, los participantes plantearon con mayor frecuencia la "falta de interacción/ asistencia profesional" de fuerzas externas y el hecho de que sean "intensivos en labor". A pesar de estas complejidades, el 82% de los entrevistados preferían el DP auto-dirigido y autoiniciado debido a su potencial y eficacia. El estudio alienta a los educadores de EFL a revisar sus perspectivas, planes y estrategias con respecto al profesionalismo y el DP.
Palabras clave: desarrollo profesional, maestros de EFL, maestros en formación inicial, desarrollo profesional autodirigido

1. INTRODUCTION

In light of the globalization of the English language and the need for a lingua franca in education, a sharp increase has appeared in learning English over the past decades (Jenkins, 2013; Taguchi & Ishihara, 2018; Zerey, 2018). This surge of attention puts teachers at the forefront of English language teaching (ELT). Moreover, the shifting needs and situations such as communicative competence, technological knowledge, and the COVID-19 pandemic placed extra responsibilities on teachers' shoulders to strike a balance between their reper-toire of knowledge/skills and the current time requirements (Cosgun & Savaş, 2019, Wang, 2023; Wang *et al.*, 2023c; Zhi & Wang, 2023; Wang & Pan, 2023; Zhi *et al.*, 2023). These complexities and peculiarities demanded teachers to take ongoing professional development (PD) courses to raise their pedagogical and professional knowledge and skills (Thakur, 2012). Teacher professional development (TPD) is defined as different activities or pieces of train-ing that teachers go through to develop their professional attitudes, skills, knowledge, and competencies (Qi, 2012). TPD can be provided formally and informally to enhance teachers' efficiency in delivering effective instruction (Cosgun & Savaş, 2019; Villegas-Reimers, 2003). However, for a long time, TPD programs were limited to one-shot, one-way, and top-down instructions such as workshops, seminars, and conferences (Porter & Freeman, 2020). Such courses followed a one-size-fits-all approach to TPD leading to scant (if any) changes in teachers' professional knowledge and practices (Bhatt, 2021).

In today's era, teachers are the cores of educational systems and societies; hence, their active participation and agency in their PD is critical (Cosgun & Savaş, 2019; Derakhshan *et al.*, 2023a, b; Derakshan & Nazari, 2022; Lieberman & Mace, 2008; Wang *et al.*, 2022a). TPD is no longer a passive endeavor, but one requiring teachers' initiative and inner forces (Zepeda, 2013). It is also contended that teacher professionalism and growth are affected by one's self-direction and others' observations (Estaji & Ghiasvand, 2022; Lopes & Cunha, 2017). While collective TPD improves teachers' sense of belongingness to a community of practice, individual TPD incurs more lifelong and autonomous learning (Murray, 2010; Porter & Freeman, 2020). Therefore, given its potential, self-directed professional develop-ment (SDPD) has recently been suggested to solve the problems of traditional TPDs and fulfill the needs of today's education (Bhatt, 2021). According to Zepeda (2013), SDPD is a professional learning, which is driven by self-motivation, determination, and initiation.

In this form of TPD, teachers take responsibility for their development instead of being passive consumers of others' knowledge and guidance (Soebari & Aldridge, 2015). Nevertheless, researching this construct has been confined to teachers' attitudes (Cosgun & Savaş, 2019), understanding (Bhatt, 2021), awareness and willingness to attend (Fraser-Seeto *et al.*, 2015), outcomes (Porter & Freeman, 2020), and contribution of technology to SDPD

(Cosgun & Savaş, 2019). An important line of research, which has been ignored, to date, is unpacking teachers' perceptions of the benefits and pitfalls of SDPD in Asian countries like China which has a collective cultural orientation. This is prominent because unraveling the perceptions of teachers is the first step to encouraging them to practice this self-planned and self-organized PD. To fill this gap, this qualitative research utilized a semi-structured interview to disclose Chinese pre-service teachers' perspectives on SDPD, especially its pros and cons.

2. Literature review

2.1. Teacher Professional Development

Given the complexities inherent in teaching, many educational institutes and policy-makers require teachers to attend pre-service and in-service PD programs. Many of these complexities are due to psycho-emotional factors involved in this profession (Derakhshan *et al.*, 2022; Derakhshan *et al.*, 2023a, b; Fan & Wang, 2022; Han & Wang, 2021; Wang *et al.*, 2022b). The necessitates TPD for improving teaching quality and ultimately students' learning (Cosgun & Savaş, 2019). Research indicates that teacher quality is a precondition for teaching effectiveness, which is in turn, acquired in TPD programs (Porter & Freeman, 2020). TPD refers to the process of gaining professional skills, knowledge, qualities, and values that allow teachers to improve constantly (Vonk, 1991). TPD research and practice have gone through three paradigm shifts, namely from a *deficit approach*, which underscores content knowledge provided by an external expert, to a *technical approach* that highlights teachers' teaching practices with outside help. The third shift foregrounded continuing professional development (CPD) that regards TPD as an ongoing, contextual, and collaborative practice (Derakhshan *et al.*, 2020). It is noteworthy that TPD programs may take different forms such as formal (workshops, seminars, conferences), informal (discussions and meetings with colleagues), individual (self-reflection, self-initiation, self-study), collective (group training courses), and virtual (webinars). The main goal of all forms is to improve teaching quality and efficiency, yet in many situations, what is taught in TPDs is not practiced completely by teachers. In other words, the input does not end in uptake and teachers get back to their previous practices. To solve these problems, educational policy-makers and program designers have shifted toward CPD and SDPD, which demand teachers to be constantlyinvolved in their PD and not wait for outside help (Kwakman, 2003). However, reaching this goal is not easy in a changing world, and high-quality TPDs must be designed and delivered.

2.2. Features of a High-quality Professional Development Program

Effective TPD is critical for teacher learning and students' academic achievement. As put by Darling-Hammond *et al.* (2017), a good TPD causes positive changes in teachers' pedagogical practices and enhances students' learning. Traditional TPDs were ineffective due to poor structures and organizations. Against these pitfalls, scholars have recently enumerated some attributes of effective TPDs. The core features of an effective TPD are related to the *content, coherence, duration, active learning*, and *collective participation* (Hubers *et al.*, 2022; Sokel, 2019). The first feature, content, means that the content of TPDs must

mirror the pedagogical and content knowledge that teachers require in their actual classes (Lieberman *et al.*, 2008). The second attribute is coherence, which is the alignment among TPD courses, authentic classroom contexts, materials, and educational policies at national, local, and school levels (Sahin & Yildirim, 2016). Duration is also significant in TPD as longer courses improve teachers' professional engagement and teaching practices (Quick *et al.*, 2009). Active learning is the next sign of effective TPDs, which underscores active and interactive learning experiences (Sokel, 2019). It takes many forms (e.g., problem-solving, discussion, role-play, simulation, etc.) by which teachers can learn from one another and reflect on their teaching practices. The last feature concerns the collective nature of TPDs which highlights interaction and collaboration among teachers regarding teaching practices, strategies, ideas, and problem solutions (Guskey, 2003). The list can continue depending on the context and discipline of TPD programs. h.

2.3. Teacher Professional Development in China

TPD in the context of China went through substantial changes after the curriculum reform of the country (Wang, 2012). This shift made TPD an integral part of Chinese teachers' pedagogical practices (Kambona, 2019). TPD programs in China revolve around 21st-century skills as they highlight the promotion of teacher competencies via inquiry-based learning (Kayange & Msiska, 2016). Moreover, Chinese teachers are encouraged to get involved in research-oriented PD programs (Wang *et al.*, 2018). Such programs are observed and monitored by the government, which plays a significant role in providing incentives and motivations for teachers to attend TPDs (Zhu & Han, 2006). TPD programs in China are usually governed and intended at three organizational levels, namely national, district, and school (Zhang *et al.*, 2021). At the national level, Chinese teachers gain professionalism and educational qualifications through ongoing in-service training in the country. Moreover, at the district level, an educational research organization provides resources for TPD including school collaboration and local presentations. Additionally, Chinese teachers can attend school-based PD courses, which are rooted in China's collective culture (Chen & Yang (2013). Such school-level programs encompass various group activities related to research, lesson plan, and assessment. Besides, daily discussions with colleagues are used in TPDs of this type (Cao & Li, 2018). Another valuable form of TPD is SDPD, which is gaining increasing attention in different educational settings, as explained below.

2.4. Teacher Professional Development in China

The process of TPD has long been approved to be obtained either with the help of others or personally (Sokel, 2019). While some teachers prefer and seek professional learning and growth by receiving training from experts, others rely on their self-motivation, self-initiation, and strong willpower (Soebari & Aldridge, 2015; Zepeda, 2013). This form of TPD, known as SDPD, opens learning possibilities for educators at any time and anywhere (Cosgun & Savaş, 2019). It allows one to gain a wide range of skills and chances outside formal settings at one's own pace. Simply, SDPD is an internally driven process that arises from the teachers' own initiatives to promote their job (Zepeda, 2013). It can determine the

success or failure of PD programs depending on teachers' internal engagement (Fraser-Seeto *et al.*, 2015). SDPD is more like "development" rather than "training" in that it is shaped and guided from the inside (Bowen, 2004).

This type of PD is planned, implemented, and directed toward one's needs, choices, and interests which is why is called intrinsic initiation and reflection (Bhatt, 2021). To practice SDPD, teachers need *independence* (to choose goals), *support* (to achieve goals), and *personal ability* (to control development) (Djatmiko, 2011). It can be achieved by action research, peer coaching, consulting, professional reading and writing, class observation, daily reflection, technology utilization, portfolio preparation, and attending workshops and conferences (Bhatt, 2021). Research shows that SDPD is mostly beneficial in deprived contexts and this has concealed the construct in educational research for years. However, in the past decade, some attempts have been made to define and conceptualize the concept in different contexts and disciplines (Cosgun & Savaş, 2019; Lopes & Cunha, 2017; Porter & Freeman, 2020). After its crystallization and approved benefits for teaching and learning, further empirical studies are expected to appear.

2.5. Teacher Professional Development in China

Given the significance of teachers' pedagogical behaviors and practices, an increasing body of research has focused on their professionalism, academic literacy, identity development, and professional success in the past decade (Fan & Wang, 2022; Fu & Wang, 2022; Mehdizadeh *et al.*, 2023). These optimal goals are claimed achievable only through effective PD programs in which teachers are active constructors of knowledge and practice (Cosgun & Savaş, 2019). Despite the growth of formal and collective TPDs in many contexts, their actual use and practice by teachers are limited. Against this backdrop, recently a self-initiated and directed form of TPD, called SDPD, has gained momentum in teacher education. It has been found effective in improving teaching and learning quality programs (Porter & Freeman, 2020). Moreover, Zerey (2018) ran a mixed-methods research on 96 Turkish EFL teachers' attitudes and perceptions of SDPD and found that the participants had a positive view of SDPD. They also considered self-motivation, organizational support, and workload as challenges of conducting SDPD.

In the context of gifted education, Fraser-Seeto *et al.* (2015) explored teachers' willingness and awareness of this mode of TPD through a questionnaire and found that they had a willingness for SDPD but lacked sufficient knowledge of it. In another study, Bhatt (2021) interviewed 5 EFL teachers in Nepal regarding the challenges of SDPD and ways to overcome them. The participants regarded large classes, ineffective training, and lack of resources as major problems. To solve them, they argued for reading books/articles, using technologies, doing action research, doing self-reflection, and collaborating with colleagues. Furthermore, SDPD has been studied in relation to information technology by Cosgun and Savaş (2019), who found IT beneficial for SDPD of Turkish EFL teachers. Likewise, Porter and Freeman (2020) conducted phenomenological research on the outcomes of SDPD for American teachers. They identified SDPD as useful in meeting teachers' professional needs, changing teaching methodology, enhancing teachers' understanding, providing a reference to use, providing a meaningful development, and improving students' learning.

Despite these studies, EFL contexts, especially China with a collective cultural orientation, lack deep analyses of teachers' perceptions of SDPD and its challenges. Many TPDs in Asian countries are still confined to traditional, other-directed programs and SDPD has recently captured scholarly attention. To encourage educators, at pre-service levels, to practice SDPD it is first essential to unpack their views of SDPD, especially its benefits and challenges. Yet, this line of thinking has been ignored, so far. To bridge this gap, this study employed a semi-structured interview to reveal Chinese pre-service teachers' perspectives on SDPD and their favorite TPD. It intended to answer the following research questions:

1. What are the benefits and challenges of self-directed professional development from Chinese pre-service teachers' perspectives?
2. Which form of professional development do Chinese pre-service teachers prefer to attend?

3. Method

3.1. Participants and Research Setting

This study was conducted in the EFL context of China, focusing on Chinese pre-service teachers' perceptions of SDPD. The data were collected from 50 Chinese teachers including both genders (male = 5, female = 45) and with different educational backgrounds (Table 1). Their ages ranged from 19 to 26 years old. They were invited to attend the interview based on the researchers' knowledge that they plan to work as teachers in a junior or senior high school after they obtain their university degrees. The respondents were from four different universities in China and were informed of the purpose of the study and reassured of their privacy and confidentiality.

Table 1. *Participants' Demographic Information*

Background Information	No.	%
Age		
19	1	2
20	1	2
21	4	8
22	22	44
23	14	28
24	1	2
25	5	10
26	1	2
30	1	2
Average: 22.68		

Gender		
Male	5	10
Female	45	90
Academic Qualification		
Bachelor's	24	48
Master's	26	52
Major		
English education	18	36
English linguistics	11	22
English translation and interpretation	10	20
English language and literature	4	8
French language and literature	1	2
English literature	1	2
Math education	4	8
Physics education	1	2

3.2. Instruments

3.2.1. Semi-structured Interview

To gather the required data, a semi-structured interview was conducted with the participants based on their willingness to cooperate. The interview included two parts (Appendix). The first part asked about the participants' demographics, while the second one focused on their perceptions of SDPD. The interview included three questions whose content validity was checked by two experienced researchers. The interview was conducted online taking 25 minutes to be completed. The researchers recorded the interviews for later transcription and analysis via a video recording tool.

3.3. Data Collection Procedure

In this study, a list of three interview questions together with demographics was requested from 50 Chinese pre-service teachers concerning their perceptions of SDPD. The interviews were done online via WeChat since the invited respondents were from five different universities. Of the sample, 24 interviewees had BA and 26 had MA degrees. The average age of the interviewees was 22.68. The data collection took about one month from December 28, 2022, to January 28, 2023. During the interviews, the respondents were free to explain and probe into more related questions regarding their perspectives on SDPD. One of the researchers had access to most of the participants for possible follow-up questions. This helped obtain valid and well-thought-out answers to the interview questions. Some of the participants provided short answers. Therefore, we asked them to give more details in another round of interview. After obtaining the whole data, the researchers divided the

interviews into parts and transcribed them word by word together. The transcriptions were then re-examined to identify typos and inconsistencies before the final analysis. Afterward, a thematic analysis was conducted through MAXQDA software (v. 2020) to extract the frequently raised themes/codes. The results were illustrated via charts and diagrams including percentages of occurrence.

3.4. Data Analysis

To analyze the data, the researchers used thematic analysis via MAXQDA software. In doing so, after transcribing the interviews, the researchers followed Corbin and Strauss' (1990) guideline with three stages of *open coding, axial coding, and selective coding*. First, the data was examined iteratively to produce some open codes. Next, the extracted open codes were joined, compared, and collated to form larger codes/themes. Lastly, the extracted themes related to each code were integrated to create larger categories of codes. During the analysis, a table including codes, themes, frequencies, and sample excerpts was designed by the researchers. After finalizing the codes, another experienced researcher was asked to examine them as a measure of inter-coder reliability ($r = 98$). During the analysis, the researchers had meetings to discuss their interpretations as an effort to safeguard credibility. Moreover, the findings were given to some of the participants to ensure the member-checking principle. As a measure of transferability, a thick description of research context, assumptions, and participants was provided. Considering positionality, in this study, the researchers were data collectors, transcribers, and analysts and as they were EFL instructors like the participants, their experiences, perceptions, values, and beliefs might have affected the findings.

4. Findings

4.1. The First Research Question

To answer this question, which explored Chinese pre-service teachers' perceptions about the benefits and challenges of SDPD, the second interview question was used and analyzed. The findings of the interview analysis ended in 19 frequent codes regarding the benefits of SDPD (Figure 1). Of these benefits, being "needs-based" and "self-directed" were the most frequent themes (repeated 16 and 15 times, respectively). Additionally, the "flexibility", "autonomy", and potential to incur "professional knowledge development" were posed by 12, 9, and 9 interviewees, respectively. Another group of benefits concerned "self-reflection", "continuous development", and "high effectiveness" as maintained 8 times across the interviews.
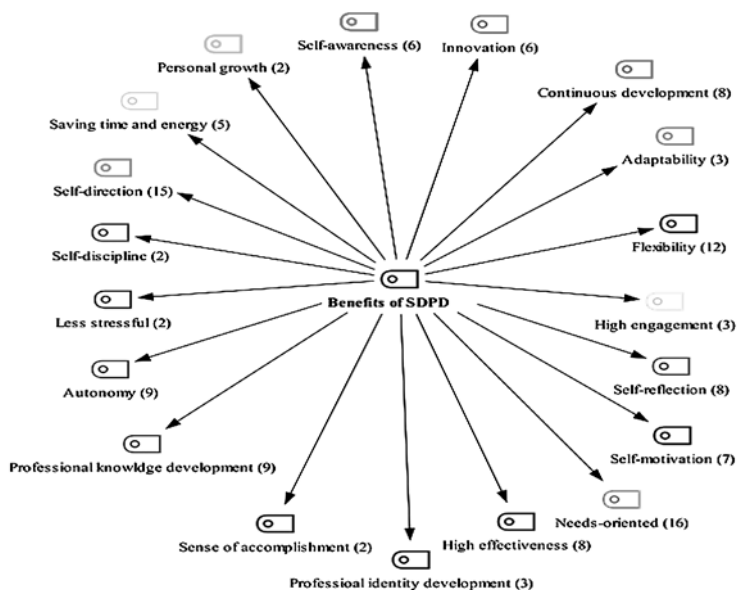
Figure 1. *The Benefits of SDPD*

The following interview samples represent some of the extracted codes:

"To me, self-directed professional development is <u>formulated</u>, <u>directed</u>, and implemented by teachers <u>themselves</u> and this truly <u>meets their own needs</u> and are more targeted. Since the time and space are relatively free, and the plan is <u>flexible</u> and <u>adjustable</u> at any time according to our <u>own needs</u> so that it is more <u>flexible</u> (T 12).

A self-directed professional development trend is very conducive to <u>personal growth</u>. It is very <u>flexible</u>, and individuals can choose <u>innovative</u> ways and resources to help them gain <u>continuous progress</u> without being overly constrained by a unified education (T 21).

On the positive side, a self-directed professional development enables teachers to increase their <u>self-awareness</u> in career <u>growth</u> and <u>development</u>, since teachers themselves are most familiar with <u>their own</u> pros and cons in teaching (T32).

Following a self-directed professional development trend, teachers can consciously and actively <u>engage</u> in <u>professional knowledge</u> and <u>improve teaching skills</u> according to their <u>own career requirements</u>. They will <u>reflect</u>, <u>engage</u>, and take the <u>initiative</u> in professional learning and improve teaching practices (T43).

Concerning the challenges of this mode of TPD, the results revealed that "lack of professional interaction/assistance" from external forces and being "labor-intensive" for teachers are the most frequent challenges of SDPD from Chinese teachers' perspectives (Figure 2). Moreover, four codes were repeated five times by the respondents, namely "teacher burnout", "too much reliance on self", "lack of solidity", and "lack of resources". Other than these

challenges, the respondents argued that "work pressure", "weak reflection skills", "unscientific plan and strategies", " time limitation", and "lack of external supervision" are also problematic in SDPD (each code repeated four times, respectively).
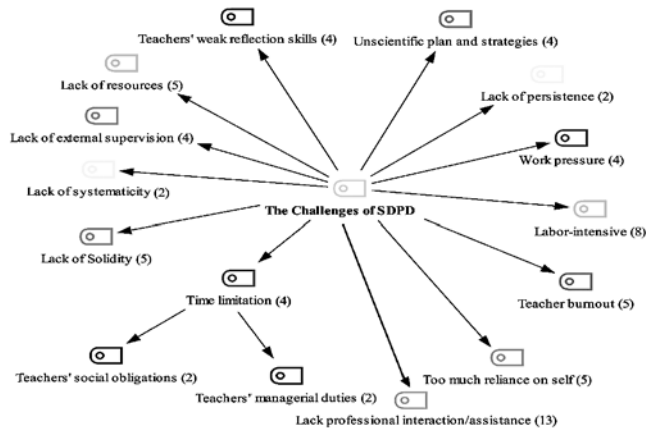

Figure 2. *The Challenges of SDPD*

The abovementioned codes are represented in the following interview responses:

In a self-directed professional development trend, teachers may lack necessary evaluations and guidance from colleagues and senior teachers (T 11).

Autonomous development without relying on external factors all the time is not that advisable considering that contemporary society is so changeable that the to-be teachers ought to keep pace with uncertainty and equip themselves with effective skills learnt from all kinds of external resources. For another, personally, I think teaching is a highly interactive career requiring a to-be teacher to actively take part in social life and interact with as well as get feedbacks from external resources (T 21).

One requires more time and energy to put self-directed professional development into practice (T15).

Too much reliance on self is a challenge in SDPD plus difficulties in finding learning resources (T42).

Self-directed professional development makes it difficult for teachers to form a solid, scientific plan and structure for second language teaching (T48).

Self-directed professional development activities may lack professional assistance, which could prevent teachers from receiving long-term and efficient development (T8).

In sum, in this research question, it was found that SDPD has different benefits and challenges for pre-service teachers. They mostly regarded this PD as useful because of

its "needs-based" and "self-directed" nature that produces "flexibility", "autonomy", and "professional knowledge development" in teachers. However, there were some challenges in implementing SDPD. The most frequent challenges were "lack of professional interaction/assistance" from external forces and being "labor-intensive" for teachers. Furthermore, "teacher burnout", "too much reliance on self", "lack of solidity", and "lack of resources" were posed as other setbacks in SDPD.

4.2. The Second Research Question

In this research question, the respondents were asked about their favorite form of TPD after enumerating the benefits and challenges of SDPD. In doing so, the last interview question was analyzed via thematic analysis. The results demonstrated that most of the pre-service teachers preferred TPD, which is either directed or initiated by themselves, based on their own experiences in using it (Figure 3). More specifically, about 82% argued for these two forms of TPD of which 41.5% preferred SDPD in pre-service programs given its potential. Moreover, 11.3% supported the use of other-initiated TPD and the remaining 7.5% suggested other-directed TPD in pre-service programs in China.
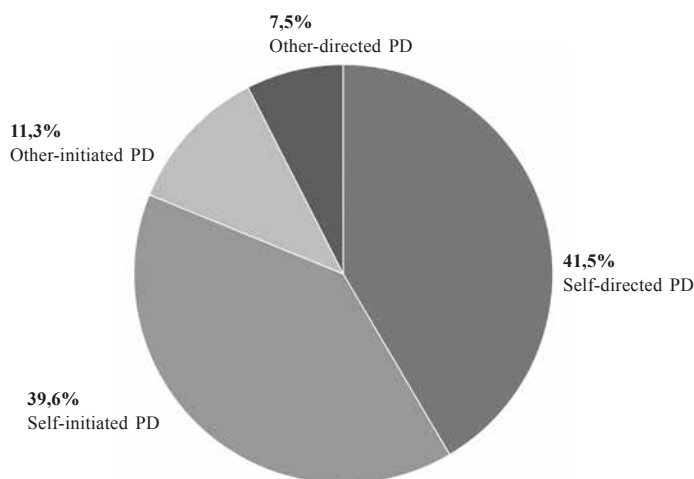

Figure 3. *Teachers' Favorite TPD*

Below are some sample interview responses representing the extracted codes/themes:

Self-initiated TPD, in my opinion, functions better in pre-service programs. Self-initiated TPD is motivated by a strong desire to improve professionally and is therefore more likely to continue in subsequent training (T 1).

In my opinion, I think self-directed TPD works better in pre-service programs. Firstly, pre-service teachers improve their professional identity through independent professional development and become teachers with a positive attitude. With this sense of identity and

belief, continuous self-learning will promote the continuous improvement of their professional ability (T 7).

In my opinion, <u>other-directed PD works better</u>. Through learning high-quality lessons and under the guidance of excellent teachers, through comparison, the professional shortcomings of new teachers can be highlighted, which is conducive to their professional development (T 23).

Based on my own understanding, <u>other-initiated TPD works better</u> in pre-service. Because other-initiated TPD can combine the benefits of others' expertise of making developmental plans and self-autonomy in development (T 31).

In conclusion, the results of interview analyses in this research question revealed that most of the Chinese pre-service teachers (82%) preferred self-directed and self-initiated PD given their potential and effectiveness. The rest of the participants suggested other-initiated and other-directed PD given pre-service teachers' low experience and knowledge of the field to run self-directed PD.

5. DISCUSSION

The present study aimed to unpack Chinese pre-service EFL teachers' perceptions of SDPD, especially its benefits and challenges. The findings of the thematic analysis of 50 interviews revealed that SDPD has different benefits and challenges for pre-service teachers. The participants mostly SDPD is useful because of its "needs-based" and "self-directed" nature along with its potential to generate "flexibility", "autonomy", and "professional knowledge development" in teachers. However, implementing SDPD was found challenging because of the "lack of professional interaction/assistance" from external forces and because it is "labor-intensive" for teachers. Furthermore, "teacher burnout", "too much reliance on self", "lack of solidity", and "lack of resources" were posed as other setbacks in employing SDPD in pre-service programs in China. The results are in line with Porter and Freeman (2020), who pinpointed that SDPD brings about teacher and teaching quality given its needs and interest-based essence. Likewise, the findings lend support to those of Porter *et al.* (2020), who found SDPD beneficial for teachers' autonomy and professional growth given its reliance on teachers' needs and interests. Moreover, the findings are partly consistent with those obtained by Zerey (2018) and Bhatt (2021), who conducted two seminal studies in Turkey and Nepal and found SDPD challenging due to its labor-intensive nature that demands several resources and expertise from teachers.

The results are attributable to Chinese pre-service teachers' enthusiasm and agency in initiating and directing their own PD programs based on their own needs, wants, and paces. Teachers' desire to form autonomous professional identities and developments may be the driving force behind this positive attitude toward SDPD. Another reason can be the shortcomings of the existing TPDs in China that encouraged the participants to hold a positive view of SDPD. Although many of the respondents agreed on the benefits of SDPD, others pointed to its complexities and challenges. This sense of doubt and uncertainty can be because of China's collective cultural orientation that has led to collective and group-based TPDs. Additionally, the challenges might be due to weak infrastructures and resources in China's

TPD programs as SDPD is a new mode of PD in the country. The perceived challenges can also be ascribed to the participants' weak professional knowledge basis which made them hold a negative view of SDPD with several setbacks. However, a knowledgeable teacher can overcome many such problems.

Another finding in this study was that most of the Chinese pre-service teachers (82%) preferred self-directed and self-initiated PD given their potential and effectiveness. Others recommended other-initiated and other-directed PD. The results concur with that of Zerey (2018), who explored 96 EFL teachers' perceptions of SDPD and identified that most of the participants favored SDPD. The results can be attributed to Chinese pre-service teachers' enthusiasm and desire to create independent identities as EFL teachers. Hence, they seek self-oriented PD programs rather than traditional and passive courses in which teachers' needs, interests, and involvement have no trace. Another reason can be the participants' improved knowledge and awareness of teaching in a changing world. In contrast to their collective cultural orientation, Chinese teachers seem to initiate a shift from other-directed TPDs toward SDPD in light of technological advancements. That is why the participants mostly favored self-directed and self-initiated PD programs.

6. Conclusion

In light of this qualitative study, which delved into Chinese pre-service EFL teachers' perceptions of the benefits and challenges of SDPD, it can be concluded that implementing SDPD is effective, but demanding for teachers. To benefit from this mode of PD, teachers need to raise their professional knowledge and skills so that they can autonomously and continuously promote their pedagogy without external forces. Additionally, it can be asserted that the success of SDPD might be context-sensitive and vary in relation to teachers' teaching experience. Given its new insights, the present study has implications for EFL teachers, at pre-service and in-service levels, teacher educators, and educational program-designers. EFL teachers can realize the uses and setbacks of SDPD and look for practical ways to implement this mode of TPD in their careers. This study also offers an internal locus of control for EFL teachers to continue building a new understanding of teaching and teacher education. Teacher educators may also find this study fruitful and run training programs in which teachers' self-initiation, reflection, and concerns are highlighted in a way that teachers are inspired to invent different self-initiated strategies for their own PD. Finally, educational policy-makers can use the findings as a starting point to modify the current plans for TPD in EFL contexts. They can help SDPD to be unmasked among educators and design plans that tackle dependency syndromes in TPDs, which mostly culminate in unsustainable impacts on teachers.

Despite these insights, the current study is limited in that it gathered the data from a small sample size that confines the generalizability scope of the findings to other settings. Likewise, it only used a semi-structured interview, while using other research instruments like observations, scales, focus-group interviews, and diaries could contribute to a deeper understanding of the issue. Given these shortcomings, future research is recommended to use mixed-methods research designs and run longitudinal studies to examine the dynamics of SDPD. The role of cultural orientations (collective vs. individual) in the process and

outcome of SDPD can be studied in the future. Moreover, cross-cultural research can be done to unpack the strategies that teachers from different countries use to implement SDPD. The role of teacher emotions in SDPD can also be explored by future researchers (see Wang *et al.*, 2021). As a case in point, the facilitative role of work engagement, reflection, immunity, well-being, resilience, and efficacy as important psychological variables in L2 teacher development can be inspected (see Dai & Wang, 2023; Derakhshan *et al.*, 2022; Fan & Wang, 2022; Han & Wang, 2021; Wang *et al.*, 2022a, 2022b; Wang & Pan, 2023; Wu *et al.*, 2023). Further research is required to identify the role of institutional factors in the efficiency of TPDs, especially SDPD. Disclosing the overlap and discrepancy between the personal and institutional perspectives is an interesting topic for future research. Finally, the mediating role of demographics and educational background in EFL teachers' use of SDPD can be examined in future studies.

7. REFERENCES

Bhatt, S. P. (2021). Self-directed professional development: EFL teachers' understanding. *International Journal of Language and Literary Studies*, *3*(4), 196-208. http://doi.org/10.36892/ijlls.v3i4.737

Bowen, T. (2004). *Continuous professional development.* The One-stop Magazine. http://www.onestopenglish.com/News/Magazine/Archive/continuous.htm

Cao, Y., & Li, X. (2018). School-based professional development of mathematics teachers in China. In Y. Cao, & F. K. Leung (Eds.), *The 21st century mathematics education in China* (pp. 319–338). Springer.

Chen, X., & Yang, F. (2013). Chinese teachers' reconstruction of the curriculum reform through lesson study. *International Journal for Lesson and Learning Studies*, *2*, 218–236. doi: 10.1108/IJLLS-02-2013-0011

Corbin, J. M., & Strauss, A. (1990). Grounded theory research: Procedures, canons, and evaluative criteria. *Qualitative Sociology*, *13*(1), 3–21.

Cosgun, G. E., & Savaş, P. (2019). Use of information and communication technology by in-service English teachers for self-directed professional development. *Electronic Journal of Foreign Language Teaching*, *16*(2), 230–249.

Dai, K., & Wang, Y. L. (2023). Investigating the Interplay of Chinese EFL Teachers' Proactive Personality, Flow, and Work Engagement. *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development.* https://doi.org/10.1080/01434632.2023.2174128.

Darling-Hammond, L., Hyler, M., & Gardner, M. (2017). *Effective teacher professional development*. Learning Policy Institute.

Derakhshan, A., Coombe, C., Zhaleh, K., & Tabatabaeian, M. (2020). Examining the roles of continuing professional development needs and views of research in English language teachers' success. *TESL-EJ*, *24*(3), 1-27.

Derakhshan, A., Greenier, V., & Fathi, J. (2022). Exploring the interplay between a loving pedagogy, creativity, and work engagement among EFL/ESL teachers: A multinational study. *Current Psychology,* https://doi.org/10.1007/s12144-022-03371-w

Derakhshan, A., Karimpour, S., & Nazari, M. (2023a). Interactional features in second language classroom discourse: variations across novice and experienced language teachers. *Applied Linguistics Review*. https://doi.org/10.1515/applirev-2023-0001

Derakhshan, A., Karimpour, S., & Nazari, M. (2023b). Making sense of emotion and identity construction through metaphors: a prompt-based. *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development*. https://doi.org/10.1080/01434632.2023.2270951

Derakhshan, A., & Nazari, M. (2022). "I am fed up with the criticisms": Examining the role of emotional critical incidents in a novice teacher's identity construction. *The Asia Pacific Education Researcher*. https://doi.org/10.1007/s40299-022-00666-1

Djatmiko, I. W. (2011, July 9). *Self-directed professional development approach: An alternative to enhance vocational teachers' character.* Paper presented at the International Seminar on Vocational Education and Training at Saphir Hotel, Yogyakarta, Indonesia.

Estaji, M., & Ghiasvand, F. (2022). Classroom supervision and professionalism: Matches and mismatches in the perceptions of novice and experienced teachers. *Applied Research on English Language*, *11*(3), 1-36. https://doi.org/10.22108/are.2022.131707.1817

Fan, J. & Wang, Y. (2022). English as a foreign language teachers' professional success in the Chinese context: The effects of well-being and emotion regulation. *Frontiers in Psychology*. https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2022.952503

Fraser-Seeto, K. T., Howard, S. J., & Woodcock, S. (2015). An investigation of teachers' awareness and willingness to engage with a self-directed professional development package on gifted and talented education. *Australian Journal of Teacher Education*, *40*(1), 1-14.

Fu, J., & Wang, Y. (2022). Inspecting EFL teachers' academic literacy development in multilingual contexts: A global vision. *Heliyon*. http://doi.org/10.1016/j.heliyon.2022.e12143.

Guskey, T. R. (2003). What makes professional development effective? *Phi Delta Kappan*, *84*(10), 748-750.

Han, Y., & Wang, Y. (2021). Investigating the correlation among Chinese EFL teachers' self-efficacy, reflection, and work engagement. *Frontiers in Psychology 12*. 763234. https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2021.763234

Hubers, M. D., D. Endedijk, M., & Van Veen, K. (2022). Effective characteristics of professional development programs for science and technology education. *Professional Development in Education*, *48*(5), 827-846. https://doi.org/10.1080/19415257.2020.1752289

Jenkins, J. (2013). *English as a lingua franca in the international university: The politics of academic English language policy*. Routledge.

Kambona, S. (2019). A review of teacher's professional development in China: A lesson to Tanzanian teachers for 21st century skills. *World Voices Nexus: The WCCES Chronicle, 3*(1), Article 2.

Kayange, J. J. & Msiska, M. (2016). Teacher education in China: Training teachers for the 21st century. *The Online Journal of New Horizons in Education 6*(4), 204-210.

Kwakman, C. (2003). Factors affecting teachers' participation in professional learning activities. *Teaching and Teacher Education, 19*, 149–170.

Lieberman, A., & Pointer Mace, D. (2008). Teacher learning: The key to educational reform. *Journal of Teacher Education*, *59*(3), 226-234. https://doi.org/10.1177/0022487108317020

Lopes, J. B., & Cunha, A. E. (2017). Self-directed professional development to improve effective teaching: Key points for a model. *Teaching and Technology Education*, *68*(2), 262-274. http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2017.09.009

Mehdizadeh, M., Pourhaji, M., & Derakhshan, A. (2023). Evolution of communities of practice, realignment of possible selves, and repositionings in EFL teacher professional identity development: A longitudinal case study. *The Language Learning Journal*. https://doi.org/10.1080/09571736.2022.2163685

Murray, A. (2010). Empowering teachers through professional development. *English Teacher Forum*, *1*, 2-11.

Porter, B. D., & Freeman, M. K. (2020). Experienced outcomes of a self-directed professional development program. *Professional Educator*, *43*(1), 36-47.

Porter, T. H., Rathert, C., & Lawong, D. A. (2020). Self-directed learning: A qualitative study of doctoral student experiences. *International Journal of Self-Directed Learning*, *17*(1), 1-18.

Qi, J. (2012). *The role of Chinese normal universities in the professional development of teachers*. (Unpublished doctoral dissertation). Toronto, University of Toronto.

Quick, H. E., Holtzman, D., & Chaney, K. (2009). Professional development and instructional practice: Conceptions and evidence of effectiveness. *Journal of Education for Students Placed at Risk*, *14*(1), 45-71.

Sahin, I., & Yildirim, A. (2016). Transforming professional learning into practice. *ELT Journal*, *70*(3), 241-252. https://doi.org/10.1093/elt/ccv070

Soebari, T. S., Aldridge, J. M. (2015). Using student perceptions of the learning environment to evaluate the effectiveness of a teacher professional development program. *Learning Environments Research, 18*(2), 163-178. https:/10.1007/s10984-017-9250-0

Sokel, F. (2019). The effectiveness of a professional development course: Teachers' perceptions. *ELT Journal*, *73*(4), 409-418. https://doi.org/10.1093/ELT%2FCCZ022

Taguchi, N., & Ishihara, N. (2018). The pragmatics of English as a lingua franca: Research and pedagogy in the era of globalization. *Annual Review of Applied Linguistics, 38*, 80-101. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0267190518000028

Thakur, G. (2012). *Self-directed professional development through online resources* [MIT-D.T. University conference paper]. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/327108720

Villegas-Reimers, E. (2003). *Teacher professional development: A review of literature*. International Institute for Educational Planning.

Vonk, J. H. S. (1991). *Becoming a teacher: Brace yourself.* Institute of Education.

Wang, B. (2012). *School based curriculum development in China: A Chinese-Dutch cooperative pilot project.* Enschede: Netherlands Institute for Curriculum Development.

Wang, Y. (2023). Probing into the boredom of online instruction among Chinese English language teachers during the Covid-19 pandemic. *Current Psychology*.43(1):1-15.https://doi.org/10.1007/s12144-022-04223-3.

Wang, Y., Derakhshan, A., & Azari Noughabi, M. (2022a). The interplay of EFL teachers' immunity, work engagement, and psychological well-being: Evidence from four Asian countries. *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development*. https://doi.org/10.1080/01434632.2022.2092625

Wang, Y., & Derakhshan, A., Rahimpour, H. (2022b). Developing resilience among Chinese and Iranian EFL teachers: A multi-dimensional cross-cultural study. *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development*. https://doi.org/10.1080/01434632.2022.2042540

Wang, Y. L., Wang, Y. X., Pan, Z. W. & Ortega-Martín, J. L. (2023c). The Predicting Role of EFL Students' Achievement Emotions and Technological Self-efficacy in Their Technology Acceptance, The Asia-Pacific Education Researcher, doi: 10.1007/s40299-023-00750-0.

Wang, Y., L., Derakhshan, A., & Zhang, L. J. (2021). Researching and practicing positive psychology in second/foreign language learning and teaching: The past, current status and future directions. *Frontiers in Psychology, 12,* 1-10. https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2021.731721

Wang, Y. L. & Pan, Z. (2023). Modelling the Effect of Chinese EFL Teachers' Self-efficacy and Resilience on Their Work Engagement: A Structural Equation Modeling Analysis. *SAGE Open*. doi: DOI: 10.1177/21582440231214329

Wang, Y., Lavonen, J. & Tirri, K. (2018). Aims for learning 21st century competencies in national primary science curricula in China and Finland. *EURASIA Journal of Mathematics, Science, and Technology Education, 14*(6), 2081-2095.

Wu, H. W., Wang, Y. L., & Wang, Y. S. (2023). What Do We Know about L2 Teachers' Emotion Regulation? A Bibliometric Analysis of the Pertinent Literature. *Forum for Linguistic Studies*, 5(3). doi:10.59400/fls.v5i3.2012.

Zepeda, S. J. (2013). *Professional development: What works?* Rutledge.

Zerey, Ö. G. (2018). Attitudes and perceptions of EFL instructors regarding self-directed professional development. *International Journal of Language Academy*, 6(1), 49-66. http://dx.doi.org/10.18033/ijla.3854

Zhang, S., Zhao, W., & Cao, Y. (2021). Toward sustainable professional development: An investigation of informal interactions among Chinese mathematics Teachers. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 12, 681774. https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2021.681774

Zhi, R., & Wang, Y. L. (2023). English as a Foreign Language Teachers' Professional Success, Loving Pedagogy and Creativity: A Structural Equation Modeling Approach. *Thinking Skills and Creativity*, 49, 101370. doi: https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tsc.2023.101370

Zhi, R., Wang, Y. S., & Wang, Y. L. (2023). The Role of Emotional Intelligence and Self-efficacy in EFL teachers' Technology Adoption, *The Asia-Pacific Education Researcher*. doi: 10.1007/s40299-023-00782-6

Zhu, X. & Han, X. (2006). Reconstruction of the teacher education system in China. *International Education Journal*, 7(1), 66-73.

8. APPENDIX

Part A) Demographic Information

1. Age: _____

2. Gender: ☐ Male   ☐ Female

3. Years of experience as a teacher

0-3	4-8	9-13	14-18	19-23	24+

4. Academic qualification

Certificate	High School Diploma	Bachelor's	Master's	Doctorate	Other

5. Major: _____

Part B) Teachers' Perceptions of Self-Directed Professional Development

1. How do you define teacher professional development in L2 education?

2. In your opinion, what are the benefits and challenges of following a self-directed professional development trend?

3. Based on your own experience as an English teacher, which form of teacher professional development (TPD) works better in pre-service programs? (e.g., self-initiated TPD, other-initiated TPD, self-directed TPD, or other-directed TPD etc.)