
| RESEARCH ARTICLE

From Screen to Classroom: Exploring the Impact of Online CPD Programmes in Enhancing Literature Teaching Practices in Iraqi Schools

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| ABSTRACT

The potential of continuous professional development (CPD) programmes to drive change and improve teaching practices is frequently restricted by the contextual challenges, particularly in contexts described as challenging EFL environments. Furthermore, CPD programmes delivered through online modes are often deemed less effective than conventional face-to-face programmes. This study sought to explore the potential of improving Iraqi English teachers' practices in teaching literature. Nine secondary school teachers were recruited in the study and took the online training for a period of six weeks. Data were collected through two rounds of class observation and follow-up interviews with the participants. First data collection round was conducted prior to the training, and the second round followed its completion. The results indicate that the training led to significant improvements, including shifting from teacher-centred informational methods to more interactive and engaging teaching methods, reducing the excessive reliance on direct translation, minimizing the amount of teacher talk and maximizing the amount of students talk, implementing some technology-based activities, and assigning different types of tasks and classroom games. This change is also manifested through the rise in students' engagement and their motivation to participate in speaking and writing activities. However, the study identified several factors that impact the effectiveness of online CPD programmes in Iraq. These included the gap between the objectives of teaching and the students' exam-driven motivation, the need to recognize and reward teachers' commitment and efforts, and the lack of IT facilities and infrastructure limitation in the local context. The reported findings underscore the importance of contextualizing the training material to fit the local educational realities and overcoming local barriers to facilitate change making and improving teaching practices.

| KEYWORDS

Teacher training, CPD programmes, online, literature, EFL, Iraq

| ARTICLE INFORMATION

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1. Introduction

Literature has long been recognized as a valuable resource for language teaching and learning, dating back to the beginning of the twentieth century (Sun, 2023). During that time, the relationship between language, literature, and culture had become a main topic for discussion and debate in the production of language learning materials (Carroli, 2008). The contribution of literature is no longer limited to providing authentic texts to the learners as is traditionally held but is seen as a rich and aesthetic source of material that can be leveraged for developing students' linguistic competence as well as their cultural awareness and critical thinking abilities (Nation, 2017; Bland, 2018). It is held that literature can expose learners to meaningful examples of language structures, vocabulary, and pragmatic functions presented in context, which textbook dialogues often fail to replicate authentically (Ismail et al., 2008). Likewise, by exposing students to the stylistic choices of literary authors and analysing them, students can develop competencies in comprehending nuanced language usage and develop literary competence (Hismanoglu, 2005). Moreover, literary works act as windows into the cultural perspectives, values, and traditions associated with the English language, fostering transcultural and translingual understanding (Barrete et al., 2010). Finally, by teaching children to analyse and evaluate

literary texts and discuss and evaluate ideas, students can develop higher-order critical thinking and personal skills (Widiastuti & Syamsi, 2023).

The accompany of literature with foreign language teaching material has not gone uninterrupted; there has been a continuous debate about the integration of literature in foreign languages curricula. Pulverness (2014) mentioned that literature moved from a welcome guest to an unwelcome guest in the making of foreign language teaching material but finally was cherished as a valuable component of the curriculum. Even with the increasing interest in utilizing literature in ELT education, some researchers questioned theorization of what literature could offer to these classes and the ways used for this purpose (Hall, 1989 [Bloemert 2016]). However, recent research has theorized the benefits that literature can offer to foreign language learning. one of the latest manifestations of this development can be seen in the empirical research that seeks to test these acclaimed benefits such as Picken (2005), Early and Marshal (2008), Macleroy (2013), Teranishi et al. (2015), and Bloemert et al. (2016). While there is generally international consensus regarding the position and benefits of literature in the EFL classroom, there is little knowledge about how this consensus is conceptualized in the diverse EFL settings around the world particularly in contexts designated as difficult circumstances (Smith, 2011). In these contexts, there is a well-recognized mismatch between the objectives of the stakeholders, namely what the learners need and what the educational leadership sets as curriculum objectives. In addition to this mismatch, teachers do not often receive quality pre- and in-service training, thus rendering their adopted methods ineffective and out-dated. This mismatch and inappropriate teacher education are thought to impact the way literature is dealt with in these classrooms. Previous research on teaching literature in Iraqi schools shows that literature is often overlooked, and teachers suffer from inadequate teaching methods and lack of specialized training (Waham, 2023).

2. Teaching literature in the ELT classes

One of the most widely attempts to help teachers develop a principled way to teach literature in their classrooms came from Lazar (1993). In this pioneering work, Lazar (1993) presented teachers with three approaches to using and teaching literature in their classrooms. In the first approach, the language-based approach, the focus is oriented towards the linguistic features of the text (lexis, grammar, and discourse) and students are encouraged to judge the text aesthetics. In the second approach, the focus is shifted onto the literary elements of the text in addition to highlighting the work background, the authors' background information, and the literary genre and devices. The third approach, literature for personal enrichment, focuses on giving the students the chance to respond to the literary text based on their personal experience and knowledge, aiming to enhance their personal growth and development. Later on, Bloemert et al. (2016) presented a more comprehensive model for the literature inclusion on ELT classes composed of four approaches: the text approach, the context approach, the reader approach, and the language approach. They explained that these four approaches function as a unified whole and addressing them in an interrelated way can enrich the literature lessons and improve students learning. The text approach is focused on the formal elements of the literary work, highlighting the aesthetic value of literature by advancing the students' sensitivity to literary texts through analysing literary language and conventions in order for students "to learn how to read between the lines and interpret relations between linguistic forms and literary meanings (p. 174). The context approach focuses on the context surrounding the literary work as an important source of cultural, historical, and social diversities of the world, representing 'a foreign world to the language learner' (p. 174). The reader approach emphasises the status of the learners as a reader as 'an independent maker of meaning' and encourages them 'to step outside their comfort zones and experiment with looking at (un)known situations in a critical way' (p. 175). In other words, students engage with literature to consider the beliefs, desires and perspectives of people from different parts of the world, where the literature and the foreign language come from. The fourth approach, the language approach, uses literature as 'a vehicle presenting genuine and undistorted language' (p. 175) to give the students the opportunity to see how language works in extended discourse and thus develop their language skills and vocabulary acquisition. These four approaches with their foci are visually displayed in Figure 1 below.

3. Background and Purpose

With the widely recognized need for tailored CPD programmes for teachers in difficult circumstances, the possibility of utilizing technology for this purpose seems rather interesting. The recent advances in technology have enabled new forms of interaction and communication. The evolution of communication from face-to-face to digital connections opened a new variety of opportunities for training outside the traditional physical workplace (Vuchkovski et al., 2023; United Nations). However, the change resulting from this advancement is context dependent, varying by several contextual factors including community and socioeconomic level, teacher willingness and preparedness, country income, etc. (UNESCO). From this perspective comes this study combining academic and professional concerns to test the possibility of improving teacher practices by tailoring an online CPD course provided by the British Council. The main research questions laid by the current study are:

1. How do Iraqi EFL teachers teach English literature, and what are their foci areas?

2. Can offering a tailored online CPD programme enhance the practices of Iraqi English language teachers regarding the teaching of literature in preparatory schools?
3. What contextual factors seem to impact the prospects for change making in the target context?

4. Research design

This study employs an action research design aiming to bring a positive change to deal with a real-world problem in the target context flowing from the living experience of the researcher as an ELT practitioner. Action research aims to enable people to find effective solutions to the problems they face in their institutions to make improvements to their working and living environments and bring positive change (Munn-Giddings, 2012; Ivankova, 2015). While action research is action-oriented, it is actual planning usually begins with a situation analysis or reconnaissance of the practices and experiences that shape the facets of the problem of their research (Trip, 2005; Armstrong & Nuttall, 2022). This stage is “the fact-finding stage for action” (Somekh, 2006, p. 11), in which the researcher identifies problems and hypothesizes solutions based on theoretical insights from literature and tests them by planning and implementing action strategies. An action research project usually involves two stages: the reconnaissance stage and the action stage (Cohen, et al., 2007). Within these two stages, several steps are usually subsumed. McNiff (2013) explained that the first stage could include reviewing current practices, identifying aspects for investigation, and asking focused questions. The second stage involves imagining the way forward, trying it out and, observing what happens, and evaluating the effect. In the current study, O’leary’s (2007) model of action research will be adopted. The model starts with identifying the problem and researching it and its probable causes. This stage will be investigated by observing the participating teachers in their classrooms to describe their practices and identify areas for intervention and improvement. Then, developing the proposed solution basing on tailoring an online course on the teaching of literature in EFL classrooms offered by the British Council and offering it to the participating teachers. Then, re-observing the teachers to evaluate the implementation of the solution and reflect on the results. This step will be accompanied by interviewing the teachers with open-ended questions.

5. Participants

Drawing on his current job network, the research recruited nine Iraqi EFL teachers from the Governorate of Babylon, Iraq. To gain information-rich data, purposive sampling method was applied involving three parameters: geographical site of school and gender of teacher/students, and age of teachers (Patton, 2005). With the exception of rural schools, schools in Iraq are solo gendered, with female teachers teaching in girls’ schools and male teachers teaching in boys’ schools. Consents were obtained from the participants and pseudonyms were given to all the participants. All the participants are fourth preparatory grade teachers. Table 1 below demonstrates the participants’ background information.

| Pseudonym | Gender | Work experience | Students gender |
|-----------|--------|-----------------|-----------------|
| MU1 | Male | 5 years | Male |
| MU2 | Male | 12 years | Male |
| MU3 | Male | 22 years | Male |
| FU4 | Female | 3 | Female |
| FU5 | Female | 14 | Female |
| FU6 | Female | 25 | Female |
| CR7 | Female | 3 | Co-gendered |
| CR8 | Male | 10 | Co-gendered |
| CR9 | Male | 21 | Co-gendered |

All the participants hold a bachelor’s degree in English language education from the University of Babylon, and all of them received a one-week professional development training from the Department of Teacher Training and Qualification at the Ministry of Education. Moreover, three of them participated in a five-day training course by Granet Education in Beirut. All the participants were approached by the researcher and were informed of the purpose of the study and expressed their interest in participating voluntarily.

6. Procedure

This study employs an action research design and consists of three main stages, followed by an evaluation phase. The first stage is the observation phase, during which the participating teachers were observed, and areas requiring intervention were identified. The second stage is the action phase, wherein the teachers participate in an online training course that covers the developed training material. The third stage involved re-observing the teachers and conducting interviews to incorporate their perspectives

on the intervention. A detailed discussion of these three stages, along with the data collected and its subsequent analysis and results, will be presented in the following sections.

6.1. The reconnaissance

The nine participant teachers were observed while teaching the first part of the literature focus. The lesson was covered in either one or two sessions, depending on the teacher's plan. A semi-structured note-taking procedure was employed to collect data, with lessons also being audio-recorded to ensure comprehensive data capture. The recorded sessions were transcribed and subsequently synthesized with the data obtained from the note-taking forms. The final data were analyzed thematically across four key areas:

1. **Material, resources, and aids**
2. **Teachers' role and focus**
3. **Students' participation**
4. **Focus of teaching and learning**

In the first area, all nine teachers adhered strictly to the textbook material, using no additional resources or aids, except for colored markers to write the lesson title on the whiteboard. In the second area, the teachers began by reading and translating the biography of the author, with some teachers translating only key or unfamiliar words. They also emphasized information likely to appear in examinations. In terms of teaching the literary excerpt, two distinct methods were observed: one approach involved teachers asking students to read portions of the excerpt aloud, one by one, while they translated the text or directed the students to do so; the other approach involved teachers reading the excerpt aloud themselves and providing translations. However, no examination-related information was specifically highlighted during the reading of the excerpt.

Regarding the exercises, teachers instructed students to complete them after translating the questions. Later on during the lesson, answers were written on the board for students to write down in their textbooks.

In the third area, students predominantly assumed passive roles, focusing on writing down translations and following the teacher's reading of the author's biography. During the reading of the literary excerpt, some students raised their hands to read sections aloud, while others volunteered to answer questions related to the translation. No silent reading was offered, and aside from the few who participated in reading or translation, students remained passive.

In the fourth area, the teachers' focus was almost entirely on defining literary terms, discussing biographical information, and exploring the story and theme of the literary work.

6.2. The action

The intervention in this study, which constitutes the action stage, involved providing the teachers with an online training course. Originally offered by the British Council, the course content was adapted to align with the specific context of the target participants. The course comprises three modules, each focusing on different aspects of teaching English through literature.

Module one sets the foundations for teaching English through literature. It explored the role of literature in language learning, identifying and evaluating the merits it brings to the language class. It also foreshadows the challenges that learners may encounter in learning a language through literature. Special attention has been paid to using the text-based approach for teaching literature in the target classes. Module two addresses developing receptive skills through literature. This included briefing the participants on the role of literature in fostering the learners' receptive skills, evaluating how literary texts can develop listening skills and reading skills, and what activities are more suitable for these types of skills. The training in this module also involved highlighting the key factors for appropriate text selection for the development of receptive skills. Module three covers developing productive skills through literature. This module explores strategies to develop productive skills through the teaching of literature. For the speaking skill, the participants were shown various strategies to develop their students' speaking skill through the use of literature. Similarly, the participants were trained to recognize the stages and genres of writing, including the use of graphic organizers for planning the writing task.

The course materials included a combination of articles, videos, and resources such as lesson plans and worksheets. The researcher selected relevant articles, which were presented via PowerPoint presentations during the online sessions. These resources were

adapted to fit within the prescribed curriculum and then shared with the participants. Video links were provided, and follow-up multiple-choice quizzes were administered to assess participants' understanding and track their progress. The training program lasted six weeks, with each module spanning two weeks. In the first week of each module, two presentations were delivered, followed by the sharing of resources and video links in the second week. The quizzes were administered at the end of the second week, and this process was repeated for all three modules.

6.3. The re-observation

The re-observation stage took place during the second semester when the participant teachers taught the second part of the literature focus, specifically *The Tempest* by William Shakespeare. The same procedure used in the reconnaissance stage was followed, with identical data collection methods employed. As in the initial observation, data were gathered in four key areas.

In the first area, material, resources, and aids, the teachers were observed using some of the resources provided during the training course, such as lesson plans and worksheets. However, they did not seem to utilize any additional aids, with the exception of one teacher who displayed a video of the play. All teachers adhered to the content of the prescribed textbook.

For the second area, teachers' role and focus, the teachers' activities were primarily focused on clarifying task instructions and offering assistance when students asked questions. In the biography of the author section, the teachers asked students to read the passage silently and subsequently provided questions on the board for students to answer during pair work. Teachers encouraged student questions during the activity and wrote key words, along with their translations, on the board. For the play excerpt, teachers explained the task instructions in both Arabic and English, distributed character analysis forms, and instructed students to read the excerpt and complete the form in pairs or groups. Teachers monitored students' progress and provided assistance as needed.

In the third area, students' participation, approximately two-thirds of the students engaged actively in the activities and followed the teachers' instructions. However, some students were hesitant, particularly during the second part of the activity involving the play excerpt. Some of the teachers made efforts to involve these hesitant students by providing additional support. The students appeared unfamiliar with the tasks, which may have contributed to their reluctance.

Regarding the fourth area, the focus on teaching and learning, the teachers covered both the closed and open-ended questions in the textbook. In addition, they introduced new questions and encouraged students to answer them orally. Teachers also instructed students to complete answers to open-ended questions at home. At the conclusion of the unit on *The Tempest*, the teachers reminded students that only the questions from the textbook would be included in the upcoming monthly and end-of-year examinations.

7. Follow-up Interviews

The participants were interviewed to gather follow-up insights regarding their experiences and perspectives. The primary purpose of these interviews was to explore the reason(s) why certain aspects of the training were effective while others were less successfully implemented. The collected data will be displayed in themes.

7.1. The merits of the training programme

The teacher's responses emphasized several benefits of the training. First, they highlighted the relevance of the training to their needs, noting that both the examples and the content were derived from the coursebook they teach in their classes. Second, they valued the accessibility of the course, which allowed them to participate without the need to take off time from their school responsibilities. They appreciated the flexibility to complete the assignments at their own convenience, while still feeling accountable due to the follow-up assignments and tests that tracked their progress. Additionally, the participants indicated that the training material was predominantly practical, avoiding excessive theoretical content. The activities provided were deemed particularly valuable, as they were considered practical, easy to implement, and not dependent on advanced infrastructure, making them suitable for use in their poorly-equipped schools.

7.2. Challenges encountered

The teachers discussed several challenges they encountered during and after the training. First, they indicated that while they invested time and effort in the training, these efforts must be recognized and rewarded by the authorities. The participants

suggested that appreciation letters would serve as a meaningful acknowledgment of their commitment. Second, the theme of the gap between the focus of the teaching and the focus of the examination was prominent in the all participants' responses.

The teachers noted that their students are primarily subject motivated and their focus on learning is driven by the desire to pass examinations. According to the teachers, only a small subset of students would be happy to go beyond examination requirements. Third, asking students to do tasks that involve non-examination-oriented material was often perceived by students as a waste of time and effort, despite the fact that these can bring enjoyment and foster fun in the classroom. In their views, action must be taken to align the content of questions in monthly and end-of-the-year examinations with the teaching objectives in order to bridge the gap between the teaching focus and the students' goals. Fourth, the participants pointed out the restrictions imposed by the local context and the available equipment in the classrooms. They suggested that the availability of IT facilities would make the classes more engaging and fun and would enable the teachers to utilize more games and interactive materials such as films and images.

8. Discussion

The current experiment sought to explore the online CPD opportunities available to Iraqi EFL teachers, with a focus on how these options could potentially impact their teaching of English literature in the classroom. By offering an adapted online CPD course available on the British Council website, this research set out to serve three purposes: help teachers improve their practices, gain a better understanding of the challenges encountered in teaching literature, and considering the contextual factors that could influence the adoption of innovative teaching techniques in underprivileged classrooms. The findings demonstrate that, while there were significant improvements in the teachers' practices, teachers faced noteworthy challenges, many of which are inherent and shaped by the local educational context. The results of the current research are discussed in themes below.

8.1. Influence of the online CPD course on teaching practices

The action stage of this research demonstrated significant results and showed that the customized CPD course had significantly improved the teachers' practices. One of the clearest improvements can be seen in the increased use of more varied and interactive teaching techniques. Instead of strictly adhering to the traditional, information-transmission method of teaching where students are assigned passive roles as observed before the intervention, teachers seemed more willing to adopt a more engaging teaching method and incorporated interactive tasks such as group work, peer discussion, and students were encouraged to evaluate the literary works and think critically. This improvement aligns with previous observations, which indicate that CPD programs can effectively introduce innovative teaching strategies that promote active learning, even in challenging contexts (Vuchkovski et al., 2023). The move towards a more student-centered approach was also evidenced in the increased use of activities aimed at promoting both receptive and productive language skills, such as character analysis and reflective writing tasks.

Additionally, the positive evaluation from the teachers showed that they found the course both effective and relevant to their classroom realities. The practical training and easy-to-use materials made the training more realistic to the targeted context. The emphasis on practical guidance, rather than theoretical content, seemed to be a key factor in the training success. These results are consistent with previous studies (Armstrong & Nuttall, 2022), which suggested that teacher professional development courses should be more oriented towards applicable and context-specific strategies in order to be more effective and sustainable.

8.2. Contextual challenges in adopting new practices

Although the training brought about significant improvements, the local education environment seemed to include several obstacles that could hold back the full potential of the online CPD training. The first obstacle has to do with the mismatch between the recommended teaching practices and the focus on standardized examinations. While the teachers appreciated the new techniques suggested during the training, they noted that the nature of the local examination system had a profound influence on their teaching. The teachers explained that the students' motivation is mainly driven by the need to pass examinations which are predominantly focused on translating and memorizing some excerpts and information from the textbook. This situation does not encourage the students to engage deeply with the literary work or with the tasks recommended by the training course. This finding echoes similar concerns reported previously that the emphasis on examination can hinder innovation in teaching methods and prevent teachers from utilizing more dynamic, student-centred approaches in their classrooms.

Iraqi teachers also faced challenges with infrastructure; they particularly reported the lack of IT support as one of the key factors in limiting their ability to implement more technology-driven teaching strategies and tasks. While the teachers were enthusiasts

of digital tools and multimedia integration into their lessons, their schools were not equipped with the necessary technology. This mirrors the findings of UNESCO (2022) report, which underscore the critical role of infrastructure in the success of online professional development and its subsequent integration into teaching practices. Without access to these substantial resources, teachers would struggle to offer their students more interactive and multimodal content, including videos and online discussions which can deepen their understanding of the literary work and enhance their cultural awareness.

8.3. The role of teacher motivation and context-specific adaptation

The teachers' own motivation to improve their teaching methods was one of the key factors in the success of this training course. The course design features including the flexibility to learn at their own pace and allowing them to access the material at their own convenient times were seen as major advantages of the course. While the teachers appreciated the course design and practical materials, they were still challenged by the students' motivation. Although the teachers adopted the change and planned their lessons to be more engaging, they observed that many of their students' efforts were more oriented towards examination preparation than on truly engaging with the study of literature. This observation reflects a common issue in education, particularly in challenging contexts, where the pressure to do well on assessments (extrinsic motivation) outweighs the desire to learn for the sake of learning (intrinsic motivation) (Ryan & Deci, 2000). This situation underscores the necessity of aligning curriculum content, teaching methods and assessment with the broader educational goals at the state level.

The teachers also emphasized the role of the local educational authorities and their continuous support in ensuring the sustainability of the changes and improvements brought about by the training. This emphasis aligns with Munn-Giddings (2012) suggestion that consistent follow-up and institutional support are fundamental to the long-term success of professional development programmes. In this study, the participants expressed the need for recognition and rewards by the educational authorities for their efforts. They also made a call for a comprehensive review and adjustment of the examination system and content so that it can better align with communicative language teaching and recent developments in language learning theories.

9. Implications for future professional development initiatives

The findings from this study offer significant insights into how CPD courses can be designed and implemented in challenging contexts where teachers have to deal with several locally inherited obstacles such as limited resources and curriculum constraints. To make future teacher training projects more efficient, they should take into consideration factors such as the state of school infrastructure and IT resources, the influence of examinations, and the teachers' motivation to seek improvement and implement change. Moreover, teacher professional development courses should be flexible, allowing the trainees to access the material at their own pace, and offering them relevant and applicable materials so that they can adapt it to their specific needs in their classrooms.

Finally, the current study underscores the utility of utilizing online platforms to offer teachers in remote areas the opportunity to improve their teaching methods and can provide an excellent alternative to face-to-face training. This option can save the educational authorities multiple expenses and offer them the chance to reach teachers working in remote areas. However, the success of offering such online courses is dependent on multiple factors including technological support, professional course design, effective training content, and consistent follow-up and recognition and reward.

10. Conclusion

While seeking change and improvement in language teachers' approaches and practices through training and professional development is often challenged by several factors including personal, professional and institutional ones, the present study shows an example of successful change within a challenging context. Teaching English in difficult teaching circumstances, often referred to as EFL challenging contexts, is even more challenging to deal with due to the many obstacles and difficulties including large class sizes, poorly equipped infrastructure, outdated teaching methods, examination-oriented teaching focus, poorly paid teachers with heavy workloads, etc. (Smith, 2011, ; Sowton, 2021). The present study, however, while implemented in a very challenging context, has brought about a positive change from different perspectives.

The first advantage can be seen in altering the teachers' beliefs and practices in the teaching of literature (Vadivel et al., 2018). These changes are manifested in the change of task types assigned by the teachers, the amount of teacher talk in class, and the change of focus in the teaching of literature. More implementation of technology and teaching aids has been motivated by this training course. The second advantage can also be seen in the change from the students' perspective. This is manifested through the students' engagement in the tasks, being more motivated to participate and speak, increasing their involvement in the doing

of the tasks, and giving them the floor to speak or write and express their subjective evaluations of the literary work under discussion. The third advantage can be seen in the change in the learning environment. It can be said that the class can be seen as a more positive environment for learning and participation as manifested by the increase in the amount of students' talking time and in the teachers' attempts to integrate technology and other aids into their classes.

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