

LEVERAGING SELF-DIRECTED PROFESSIONAL LEARNING FOR PROFESSIONAL GROWTH: CASE OF A HIGHER EDUCATION

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Abstract

This study explores the Self-Directed Professional Learning experience of EFL instructors at language centre in a higher education setting. Through Self-Directed Professional Learning, instructors proactively, intentionally, and autonomously take the primary responsibility to improve their knowledge, skills, and instructional practices by identifying learning needs, setting goals, selecting resources, and engaging in continuous professional development. By discovering how the EFL instructors engaging in Self-Directed Professional Learning as well as identifying the supporting and constraining factors, this study provides practically actionable insights of Self-Directed Professional Learning practices and the influencing dynamics. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, and focused-group discussion involving five EFL instructors in a higher education setting. The findings reveal two types of practice preferences, namely theoretical and practical guides. Key supporting factors of instructors' Self-Directed Professional Learning engagement include self-will and persistence, collegial support, institutional policy, and moderate flexibility of classroom exploration. Inversely, limited financial resources, teaching workload, time constraints, administrative-bounded practice, and lack of institutional initiative were identified as the significant barriers. These results highlight the emphasis of providing extrinsic support, in addition to intrinsic drivers, to nurture Self-Directed Professional Learning engagement.

Keywords – Self-Directed Professional Learning, Professional Development, higher education

Introduction

The notion of professional development has become the central emphasis in relation to the provision of quality educator. By engaging in professional development, educator takes part in “processes and activities designed to enhance the professional knowledge, skills, and attitudes of educators so that they might, in turn, improve the learning of students” (Guskey, 2000, pp.16). However, Guskey (2000) also mentioned that some factors, such as too top-down and too isolated from realities, a waste of time, and contractual obligation greatly reduce the effectiveness of professional development endeavour. This claim is

further confirmed by recent studies finding that relevance of training, duration, frequency, and follow up are among the impeding factors of professional development effectiveness (Revina et al., 2023; Setiawan et al., 2024; suryanti et al., 2022). These findings lead to the discussion of self-directed professional learning as part of informal as well as non-formal professional development endeavour.

Educator bears moral and professional responsibility to be able to demonstrate adaptive responses toward the evolving educational context by engaging in continuous learning. The body of literature has paid notable recognition

on self-directed professional learning and its positive relation with teacher adaptation, and quality of teaching and learning (Fransen, 2022; Said & Abdallah, 2024; Wardhani et al., 2024). Self-directed professional learning means that educators keep developing and updating knowledge, skills, and instructional practices beyond formal training programs (Knowles, 1975; Wu, 2021).

While self-directed professional learning is a significant contributor to professional growth, there is limited understanding on how non-permanent English instructors, as marginalized teaching population, engage in self-directed professional learning. Studies mostly explore self-directed professional learning of tenured teachers and professors in K-12 and higher education settings. Therefore, this study seeks to fill this gap by exploring on how non-permanent English instructors practice their self-directed professional learning, and to identify contributing and impeding factors of its practice. Thus, the research questions are as follows:

1. How is the practice of self-directed professional learning?
2. What are the contributing and impeding factors in self-directed professional learning implementation?

Through these questions, this study will contribute to a deeper understanding on how non-permanent English instructors independently navigate professional growth. This study will also inform institutional policies and empower marginalized teaching population.

Understanding Self-Directed Professional Learning

Self-directed professional learning is the applied translation of self-directed learning (SDL), one of the underlying theories, into practice. According to Knowles' (1975) SDL is "a comprehensive process in which

individuals take the primary initiative, with or without the help of others, in diagnosing their learning needs, formulating goals, identifying human and material resources, choosing and implementing appropriate learning strategies, and evaluating learning outcomes" (p.18). This definition highlights the emphasis of educators as active agent in managing their professional learning journey. This emphasis is further supported by Garrison (1997) who proposed a model of SDL integrating self-management, self-monitoring, and motivation. The model puts the significance collaboration between individual and social responsibility.

The practice of self-directed professional learning is inseparable from teacher agency as the foundational concept to understand educators' purposeful and strategic acts. Teacher agency is beyond autonomy and freedom. It's teacher's capacity, even within the constraints of systemic policies, to be able to take intentional actions and shape pedagogical practice on the basis of professional knowledge and beliefs (Priestley et.al., 2015). Educators who have the agency to navigate their own learning in meaningful ways are highly likely to engage in intrinsically motivating process relevant to their specific context.

Self-directed professional learning is also deeply rooted in constructivism, both cognitive and social. The cognitive constructivism helps to understand the internal process of learning by integrating new information and pre-existing knowledge through active exploration, assimilation, and accommodation. Meanwhile, the social constructivism explains the learning process through social and cultural context. These views of both cognitive and social constructivists place educators as the key constructor of professional learning

journey through active knowledge construction, and social collaboration.

In addition, understanding self-directed professional learning is also related to the self-determination theory (SDT). This theory explains that when the three human's psychological needs are accommodated, the intrinsic motivation reaches its optimal function. Deci and Ryan (2000) mention the three needs are autonomy (the need to feel in control of one's own behavior); competence (the need to feel effective in one's interactions with the environment), and relatedness (the need to feel connected to others). Through self-directed professional learning, educators self-direct their own study (autonomy); then, their knowledge and skills are improved (competence); and they experience connection through peer collaboration or guidance (relatedness). Therefore, learning process is more meaningful and optimal when the person feels driven from within.

Synthesizing, self-directed professional learning is a proactive self-governing pursuit of improvement necessary for reaching optimum potential. By leveraging self-directed professional learning, non-permanent English instructors might be able to navigate their professional growth to the fullest, and, therefore, make impacts in everyday classroom practices. Understanding how self-directed professional learning influences instructors' professional growth is a significant endeavor to provide supports and to promote overall quality of instruction.

Previous Research and Gap Identification

This study embarks from previous research on professional learning which show that non-permanent English instructors' context is overlooked. One of previous studies conducting research on professional learning is Utami and Prestidge (2018). The finding explained that teachers' engagement to professional

learning is limited although they perceive it as important and are interested in it. This is because self-directed professional learning does not add to credits for career advancement. Another previous study conducted by Cirocki and Farrel (2019) involving 250 EFL secondary teachers from Eastern, central, and Western of Java Island found that self-directed professional learning is the least preferred endeavor for continuing professional development. The last is Qamariah and Hercz (2025). The study explores the contributing factors enhancing EFL instructors' professionalism in higher education context. The study invited 10 EFL instructors with teaching experience of four to five years and discovered that the instructors pursued self-directed professional learning more. It was because, they claimed, there was very limited offer from the institution.

This study offers a novel contribution to the field of English Language Education by providing insight self-directed professional learning from non-permanent English instructors in a higher education setting. Unlike the previous studies which put a focus more on K-12 teachers and tenured lecturers or professors in universities, this study delves into the implementation of self-directed professional learning. By integrating data from semi-structured interview and focused-group discussion, this study captures the practice, as well as the contributing and impeding factors for self-directed professional learning. Self-directed professional learning practice, drawing from Knowles (1975), refers to a step of executing suitable learning strategies. The practice involves the instructors internalize cognitive and pedagogical understanding, and implement it in the context of their classrooms. The phase also involves simultaneous self-management and self-monitoring. In addition, this study also looks into self-directed professional learning through the lens of SDL, agency,

constructivism, and SDT. This study also provide insight for educational institution and policymakers to make supportive environment available to promote self-directed professional learning which ultimately can have positive impacts on instructors' professional growth, students' learning, and overall quality education.

Methodology

This study employs case study design by referring to the research questions and the nature of knowledge that this study seeks to discover. This study involved five non-permanent English instructors from a language learning center in a higher education setting. Participants were selected through purposive sampling and the criteria were non-permanent English instructors who have a minimum of bachelor degree in either English education or English literature, and those who have five to ten years of teaching experience in the institution. The latter criterion was formulated because, based on the preliminary study, the group were discovered to carry out self-directed professional learning more compared to the other groups. Data were collected using semi-structured interviews and focused-group discussion. Both the interviews and discussion provided detailed contextual insight about self-directed professional learning implementation among the non-permanent English instructors. The interviews explored how non-permanent English instructors seek resources, leverage supports, and overcome obstacles in their professional learning. The focused-group discussion, further, facilitated the identification of collective trends and dynamics in instructors' approaches to professional growth. The interviews and focused-group discussion were also through a piloting step. The data, then, were analyzed using six-phase thematic analysis from Braun and Clarke (2006). The steps involved jotting down the first impression from the transcripts,

generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report.

Finding and Discussion

Findings on Self-Directed Professional Learning Practice

Interview Insights

The semi-structured interviews provide insights on how the five non-permanent English instructors engage in self-directed professional learning. Despite differences in experience and personal approach, a clear pattern emerges that learning is initiated by authentic classroom challenges, pursued through a combination of collegial and digital resources, managed through flexible self-management, monitored through informal reflection and students' cues, and enacted through adaptive classroom implementation. The following table prsents the key thems that recurred across all participants, alongside representative quotes and the number of instructors who explicitly demonstrated each theme.

Table 1. Key Themes from Interviews

Key Themes	Representaive Quotes	Number of Instructors (out of 5)
Collegial sharing	"Sharing with colleagues about, for example, why my students have difficulties in this part."	5/5
Preference for materials	"Practical guide can be directly applied."	5/5
Flexible self-manageme nt	"There were no structured plan of learning ... it's more about responses towards what I encountered."	5/5

Self-monitoring	“One of the indicators is cues or feedback from students.”	5/5
Classroom implementation	“Most of the time, I adapt.”	5/5

Learning Strategies and Resources

All instructors described learning that begins with a concrete problem rather than abstract curiosity. P5 summarised the shared sentiment “immediate needs are important ... what we face in the classroom context and what needs to be solved immediately, that should be the priority.” The triggers ranged from under-engaged group of students (P1) to mismatched lesson planning expertise (P3) and heavy reliance on outdated grammar teaching (P4). These needs made instructors to seek resources purposefully. The resource landscape is dominated by colleagues and informal workplace sharing. P2 noted that she and her peers naturally share their classroom experiences. P4 routinely consulted to colleagues before or after class. P5 credited senior non-permanent colleagues as formative in his early resilience. External communities were also used by P3 offering regular free webinars and teaching strategies. Further, online courses and workshops were used when a deeper, structured intervention was felt necessary. P1 enrolled in a three-month guided differentiation course because “I prefer the guided ones because the timeline is provided and the focus is clear.” P3 completed free British Council courses on lesson and course planning, while P5 built a personal “resource bank” in his mind constructed from Facebook teacher groups, recorded webinars, and academic blogs. YouTube served as a quick resource for P4 who searched for practical grammar explanations. Across all cases, practical ready to adapt materials were preferred over purely theoretical guides because, as P4

explained, “It is easier to understand than the theories”.

Self-Management

None of the instructors followed a rigid, long-term study plan. Instead, they employed flexible need-based scheduling, for example, P2 mentioned “there are no rigid study plan, it’s more of responses from what happens in the classroom contexts.” Meanwhile, P5 deliberately allocated part of his semester break to deeper exploration.

Self-Monitoring

All the five instructors relied on students’ responses and personal reflection to gauge their self-directed professional learning progress. P5 engaged in what he termed as informal reflection. He said “I rather did informal reflection ... what lacks, what media should be used.” P2 monitored her own progress by the smoothness of her classroom delivery. If she is not sure about the steps, then she needs further review.

Classroom Implementation

The bridge between learning and teaching was consistently marked by adaptation rather than pure adoption. P2 expressed the majority view by saying “Most of the time, I adapt because most of the resources I found were not a hundred percent suitable with what I need in my classroom contexts.” Even when a resource was directly applicable, instructors tweaked it for class size, proficiency, and dynamics.

Focused-Group Discussion Insights

The focused-group discussion confirmed that self-directed professional learning practice among the five non-permanent English instructors drew on a blend of informal and structured resources. The most immediate and frequently mentioned source was casual collegial sharing. Conversations occurred naturally “in the parking lot, or it might take place when walking from the fourth floor to the ground floor” (P3). These exchanges were valued for delivering practical,

context-based ideas with minimal time cost. Beyond the workplace, participants engaged with webinars, short online courses, and educational videos. Several had completed free British Council self-paced courses, appreciating the flexibility to learning “according to my available time” (P3). P4 intentionally searched on TikTok for speaking activity ideas and then turns into her For Your Page. P5 preferred reading best-practice articles rather than pure research, because they offered concrete classroom strategies.

Self-management was characterized by intentional flexibility rather than rigid timetables. The participants agreed that sustaining learning was more important than achieving overly specific targets. P5 framed it as a marathon “the most important is how we could make it sustainable, we do it continuously.” Consequently, learning activities were fitted into the times between teaching, during evenings, or on weekends. Short webinars and self-paced modules were preferred because they could accommodate unpredictable workloads without becoming overwhelming.

When implementing new ideas, instructors relied heavily on informal observation and self-reflection to monitor progress. They simultaneously acted as teachers and researchers in their own classrooms, watching whether students became more engaged, spoke more, or demonstrated better understanding. Alongside these external cues, participants increasingly recognized internal indicators of success. A sense of increased confidence, feeling “more confidence” (P3) or “feeling at ease” (P1). This dual monitoring helped them decide whether a strategy was on the right track.

Findings on Contributing and Impeding Factors Interview Insights

The extent to which the five non-permanent English instructors engaged in self-directed professional learning was shaped by a dynamic interplay of personal, social, institutional, and practical factors. While each instructor’s context differed, a consistent set of enablers and obstacles emerged that either fostered or hindered their ability to initiate and sustain learning.

Table 2. Key Themes from Interviews

Factor Type	Key Theme	Representative Quote(s)
Contributing	Intrinsic motivation and professional identity	“A teacher who stops learning should stop teaching.” (P5) “I don’t feel satisfied with myself.” (P1)
Contributing	Collegial support	“I naturally share to my colleague about what I experience in my classroom context.” (P2) “I learn a lot from peer interactions.” (P5)
Contributing	Availability of free / affordable resources	“One of the convenient way for me is to participate in free webinars.” (P3) “British Council ... everyone knows.” (P1)
Contributing	Institutional policy	“Every semester, the institution holds workshop and best practice presentation.” “We are given the syllabus. We have teacher discretion.” (P1)

Contributing	Problem-driven urgency	“Immediate needs ... i prioritize which one should be solved first.” (P5) “I sorted and selected the most urgent one.” (P1)
Impeding	Financial barriers	“There are some website requiring to sign up and pay ... so, I didn’t take it.” (P4) “There was a course but it requires the participants to pay for 100 dollars, so no.” (P1)
Impeding	Institutional policies	“There are SOP, so this probably cannot be implemented.” (P2) “The flexibility is limited / bounded with SOP, materials, and syllabus.” (P5)
Impeding	Lack of formal community	“Because there is no community, so I do it according to my convenience.” (P2) “There is not yet an initiative to begin the bottom up.” (P5)
Impeding	Emotional and cognitive overload	“Carrying out some roles at one time, it is draining.” (P2) “Flow of information, overwhelming, draining.” (P5)

Contributing Factors

A powerful internal driver across most participants was intrinsic motivation rooted in professional identity. A participant articulated a lifelong learning imperative, while another participant described teaching as an identity he had built since his college era, making continuous learning a natural extension of oneself. The other driving force was coming from a realization that regardless of temporary status, the participant said “I was not satisfied with myself.” This personal standard turned a classroom problem into an urgent call to learn.

The most universally cited enabler was the presence of supportive colleagues. All five instructors emphasized that informal sharing with colleagues was their primary source of practical ideas, emotional validation, and advice. Beyond the immediate workplace, external communities also provided updates about teaching strategies, creating a continuous stream of affordable learning opportunities.

Institutional provision also played a modest but meaningful role. Workshops held at the beginning of semesters, best-practice sharing sessions, and flexible scheduling were valued by the instructors. Another crucial enabler is the flexibility to use teacher discretion as a space to experiment with newly acquired ideas.

Finally, the availability of free, credible online resources removed a significant entry barrier. These resources made learning to encouraging enough for the participant because no travel and minimal, if any, financial requirement.

Impeding Factors

Despite the enablers explained above, several persistent barriers constrained self-directed professional learning engagement. The most frequently mentioned was heavy and unpredictable workload. Demanding teaching schedules, extensive grading, and sudden makeup classes left instructors drained

and reduced the time available for sustained learning. A participant described how last-minute makeup classes “disturbed the timeline I made.”

Financial constraints further limited access to rich professional development. While many resources are free, many high quality specialized courses often come with large amounts of financial resource. A participant had to leave a course on neurodivergent learners priced at over a hundred dollars. Another participant also had to abandon any website that required sign-up or payment. These realities mean that instructors frequently settle for what is available rather than what is optimal.

While the given syllabi and materials give room for engagement in self-directed professional learning, it also impedes instructors to experiment fully. Participants recognized that the given standard operating procedure causes them to think “Oh, there’s this thing in the SOP, so I may not be able to implement this here.”

A less tangible but important barrier was the absence of a regular structured professional learning community. Without formal structured professional learning community, learning tends to be dependent on individual convenience. Finally, emotional and cognitive overload could temporarily deplete the energy required for learning.

Focused-Group Discussion Insights

The FGD revealed a nuanced contributing and impeding factors shaping instructors’ engagement in self-directed professional learning. Among the strongest contributing factors was intrinsic motivation grounded in professional identity. The shared opinion that teachers must keep learning to remain effective created a baseline for personal commitment. This internal drive was continually renewed by the dynamic nature of teaching as new challenges like

AI emerges. Instructors felt learning is a need and even a must to keep up.

Collegial relationships were the most mentioned contributing factor. Participants described a culture of openness in which asking for help or sharing a concern was effortless. P4 said she preferred asking colleagues first because “having conversation with colleagues are more direct”. This existence of even a small, informal community was thus a critical resource.

Institutional provision also contributed positively although it sometimes flawed. Best-practice sessions, sharing groups, and conference allowance offered structured opportunities to learn and disseminate knowledge. Teacher discretion over syllabus implementation gave room for experimentation, which participants valued as essential for trying out newly acquired strategies.

Accessible free digital resources lowered the financial and logistical barriers to entry. British Council courses, recorded webinars, and short video tutorials on social media platform meant that learning could happen anytime. This abundance allowed instructors to choose resources that matched their immediate goals and available time.

However, on the impeding side, heavy and unpredictable workloads were universally mentioned. Packed teaching schedules, extensive grading, and makeup classes consumed the time and energy that might otherwise go to learning. P5 noted that professional learning often had to be postponed to semester breaks while others squeezed it into narrow windows between classes. Financial constraints remained a reality for paid courses and conferences, forcing instructors to settle for free alternatives even when paid options promised deeper content.

The absence of a formal professional learning community was another significant barrier. Without a dedicated space and scheduled time for collective reflection, learning through

sharing remained dependent on chances. The last impeding factor was emotional and cognitive overload. The emotional labour of managing diverse student groups could be draining. Yet participants showed resilience by adopting a sustainable marathon mindset and by leaning on one another. The interplay among these factors ultimately shaped professional learning between personal drive and external constraints.

Discussion

The findings of this study explain a need-responsive, socially embedded, and reflective learning process. This is in resonance with the foundational theories about self-directed learning, teacher agency, constructivism, and self-determination, while also echoing the broader empirical literature on teacher professional learning.

The instructors in this study demonstrated that their learning began with a clear diagnostic moment, for example, a realisation that lesson-planning knowledge from undergraduate study was outdated or ethical complexities of generative AI. This readiness to learn was not only influenced externally but also arose from the adult learner's need to cope with real-life tasks. The instructors also showed the self-concept of autonomous learners by taking charge of finding resources.

Self-management, as one of Garrison's (1997) integrated model, was also evident in the instructors' flexible scheduling of learning activities around their workload. Self-monitoring took the form of ongoing, informal reflection. Instructors constantly observed students' engagement, participation, and exercise performance to check whether a new strategy was working. The integration of external cues and internal cues is a sign of effective self-monitoring in Garrison's framework.

Additionally, Priestley's (2015) ecological model of teacher agency provides a useful lens to understand why some instructors engage more with learning despite similar context. The instructors' iterational dimension was evident in how prior experiences shaped their learning priorities. The practical-evaluative dimension was manifested in the factors they navigated daily, such as heavy workloads and limited financial resources. Averina and Kuswandono (2023) also discovered that excessive workload and lack of time are among the two significant impediments for educators to pursue professional learning although they are intrinsically motivated. The projective dimension was particularly salient. For some, the temporary employment status initially suppressed agency while for others, it became fuel. For example, P1 decided that her status does not define who she is. When the projective dimension aligned with a strong professional identity, agency for self-directed learning was powerfully activated.

The findings also reflect a dual constructivist process. Cognitive constructivism emphasises the individual's active construction of knowledge through reflection and adaptation. The instructors engage in self-directed professional learning when they individually searched for resources, reflected on their classroom observations, and adjusted their teaching. P1's modification of grouping strategies after an initial trial illustrates a personal, iterative scheme of assimilation and accommodation. Social constructivism is even more prominent in the data. Learning occurred substantially within the zone of proximal development facilitated by more knowledgeable colleagues. The informal conversations that happened among instructors functioned as collaborative meaning-making. Thus, self-directed professional learning was not a solitary activity, but it was deeply

embedded in a social context. This is in line with Admiraal et al. (2016) who suggest that an open, collaborative school culture is characterized as significant enabler for professional learning.

Further, this study's findings map the intrinsic motivation thrives when three basic psychological are met. Autonomy was experienced through the freedom to interpret syllabi and choose teaching methods and through the exercise of personal choice in what, when, and how to learn. Competence was supported by successful implementation cycles, when a new strategy led to increased teacher confidence, as described by P2, it reinforced the instructor's sense of effectiveness. Relatedness, the most powerful need in the data, was met through collegial relationships. The frequent informal sharing with peers provided emotional support, validation, and a sense of belonging to a community. SDT, thus, explains why the presence of supportive colleagues was the most mentioned contributing factor. These findings are inaccordance with Dewi et al. (2024), and Qamariah and Hercz (2025) who discovered that powerful intrinsic motivation from educators to improve pedagogical skills, subject knowledge, and language proficiency.

Conclusions

The self-directed professional learning of these non-permanent English instructors is a complex dynamic achievement, it is fueled by genuine classroom needs, and sustain by intrinsic motivation and collegial bonds. Theoretical lenses together illuminate this practice as both an individual cognitive endeavor and a deeply social process. For institution, the implication is clear. Fostering self-directed learning cannot rely on informal networks alone. It requires intentional cultivation of professional communities, and recognition of agentic potential of all instructors. Future

research could explore how targeted interventions, such as structured peer learning groups, might strengthen the sustainability and equity of self-directed professional learning.

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