

On the function of teacher professional development (TPD) programs in improving language teachers' engagement in online education environments: Voices from Chinese English teachers

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ABSTRACT: Given the integral role of teacher engagement in the efficiency of education, factors contributing to increased teacher engagement have always been at the forefront of researchers' attention. Simply put, great attention has been dedicated to the predictors of teachers' physical, cognitive, and emotional engagement in classroom contexts. However, factors predicting teachers' engagement in online classes have somehow been neglected. Moreover, to the best of our knowledge, no inquiry has considered the role of teacher professional development programs in language teachers' engagement. To address these gaps, this study looked into the determinants of teacher engagement in virtual language courses and the function of professional development programs in increasing Chinese teachers' engagement in online English classes. To accomplish this, an open-ended inventory was given to 37 Chinese English teachers. The thematic analysis of the dataset indicated that most of the participants perceived extrinsic factors such as user-friendly platforms, effective professional development programs, and principals' transformational leadership to be more influential in teacher engagement. Data analysis also showed the majority of respondents viewed professional development programs to be highly effective in promoting teacher work engagement. The outcomes may be instructive for all teachers and educational principals working in online education environments.

Keywords: teacher engagement, professional development programs, online education environments, English teachers, China

Sobre la función de los programas de desarrollo profesional de profesores (TPD) para mejorar la participación de los profesores de idiomas en entornos educativos en línea: voces de profesores de inglés chino

RESUMEN: Dado el papel integral de la participación de los maestros en la eficiencia de la educación, los factores que contribuyen a aumentar la participación de los maestros siempre han estado a la vanguardia de la atención de los investigadores. En pocas palabras, se ha prestado gran atención a los predictores del compromiso físico, cognitivo y emocional de los profesores en los contextos del aula. Sin embargo, los factores que predicen la participación de los profesores en las clases en línea se han descuidado de alguna manera. Además, a nuestro leal saber y entender, ninguna investigación ha considerado el papel de los programas de desarrollo profesional de los profesores en la participación de los profesores de idiomas. Para abordar estas lagunas, este estudio examinó los determinantes de la participación de los profesores en los cursos de idiomas virtuales y la función de los programas de desarrollo

profesional para aumentar la participación de los profesores chinos en las clases de inglés en línea. Para lograr esto, se dio un inventario abierto a 37 profesores de inglés chino. El análisis temático del conjunto de datos indicó que la mayoría de los participantes percibieron e Factores intrínsecos como las plataformas fáciles de usar, los programas de desarrollo profesional efectivos y el liderazgo transformacional de los directores para que sean más influyentes en la participación de los maestros. El análisis de los datos también mostró que la mayoría de los encuestados consideraban que los programas de desarrollo profesional son muy efectivos en la promoción de la participación del trabajo de los maestros. Los resultados pueden ser instructivos para todos los profesores y directores educativos que trabajan en entornos educativos en línea.

Palabras clave: participación de los profesores; programas de desarrollo profesional; entornos educativos en línea; profesores de inglés; China

1. INTRODUCTION

Quality education typically begins with engaged teachers (Greenier et al., 2021). Simply said, the level of engagement a teacher demonstrates in the working environment has a direct impact on the efficiency of education (Han & Wang, 2021). This is why teacher work engagement is highly important in any instructional-learning context (Li, Yao, Liu, & Zhang, 2021). However, as Keleynikov et al. (2022) mentioned, teacher work engagement is much more important in online education environments. According to them, the heavy tasks and responsibilities that online instruction imposes on teachers require additional engagement in the working environment. The engagement of teachers in the workplace is termed work engagement (Schaufeli et al., 2002), which implies “a positive, fulfilling and work-related state of mind that is characterized by vigour, dedication and absorption” (Schaufeli et al. 2002, p. 75). In the words of Bakker et al. (2008), teacher work engagement embraces the time and energy teachers spend at work to respond to their job demands.

Teachers who spend more hours in the workplace are more likely to thrive in their teaching vocation (Arifin et al., 2014; Pongton & Suntrayuth, 2019; Zeng et al., 2019). Likewise, Zhang and Yang (2021) asserted that students can attain desirable academic outcomes under the leadership of engaged instructors. In view of the central role of teacher engagement in student academic growth (Zhang & Yang, 2021), a large number of studies (e.g., Chen, 2022; Dai & Wang, 2023; Ersin et al., 2022; Ge, 2022; Liu et al., 2023; Wang et al., 2022; Xu, 2023; Xu & Jia, 2022; Yang, 2022, among others) have inspected the antecedents of this variable in instructional contexts. However, the majority of previous studies have focused on the predictors of teacher engagement in face-to-face (FTF) classes. Because of this, little is known about the determinants of teacher work engagement in online or virtual courses (Obrad & Circa, 2021, Wang et al., 2023). To address this lacuna, this research attempts to explore the function of teacher professional development (TPD) programs in improving English teachers’ engagement in online education environments.

Professional development programs that may contribute to teachers’ engagement in online courses generally refer to a variety of learning opportunities that employees seize to improve their professional skills and competencies (Borg, 2018; Havnes & Smeby, 2014). In the teaching career, professional development programs involve active learning activities through which instructors can broaden their teaching competence (Derakhshan & Nazari, 2022). For Dunst et al. (2015), professional development programs are various “formal” and

“informal” experiences that assist in-service instructors to update and refine their present instructional skills and knowledge. As put by Zeng (2023), these formal and informal experiences are of great help to instructors in increasing their students’ learning outcomes. This implies that professional development experiences have a desirable influence on the quality of instruction (Gore et al., 2017).

With the importance of professional development programs in mind, many research studies (e.g., Guo et al., 2023; Lee et al., 2017; Mohan et al., 2017; Pehmer et al., 2015; Wolf & Peele, 2019, to cite a few) have probed the desirable consequences of these programs in different instructional-learning environments. Yet, little is known about the implications of professional development programs in language classes. Furthermore, the function of professional development programs in enhancing language teachers’ work engagement has been neglected by previous studies. Additionally, to the best of the researchers’ knowledge, no language study has scrutinized the role of professional development programs in promoting teachers’ participation in virtual classes. This investigation plans to bridge the highlighted gaps by evaluating the function of professional development programs in raising Chinese teachers’ engagement in online English classrooms.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Teacher Professional Development Programs

The term “teacher professional development” pertains to the gradual improvement that occurs in teachers’ professional abilities throughout the teaching vocation (Glatthorn, 1995; Walling & Lewis, 2000). With respect to this definition, Villegas-Reimers (2003) characterized teacher professional development programs as “regular opportunities and experiences planned systematically to promote teachers’ growth and development in the teaching profession” (p. 12). In a similar vein, Richter et al. (2014) described teacher professional development programs as formal and informal opportunities that help teachers extend their instructional knowledge. Formal experiences comprise different learning events, including workshops, webinars, and teacher training courses (TTCs), designed systematically to improve instructors’ teaching abilities (Kyndt et al., 2016; Wang et al., 2023). Informal experiences include active learning activities that instructors undertake in and out of the classroom to promote their teaching skills (Manuti et al., 2015). Reading academic papers, communicating with other educators, and thinking about their own instructional practices are some informal activities teachers do to develop their professional competencies (Borg et al., 2022). It is widely acknowledged that teachers who make the best of these formal and informal opportunities function more effectively in the workplace (Derakhshan et al., 2020; Ke et al., 2019; Ravhuhali et al., 2015).

The central position of professional development programs in promoting teaching quality has drawn the attention of many educational researchers (e.g., Lee et al., 2017; Li et al., 2022; Mehdizadeh et al., 2023; Mohan et al., 2017; Nazari et al., 2020; Pehmer et al., 2015; Wolf & Peele, 2019; Zaidi et al., 2018, among others) to these professional programs and their pedagogical outcomes. Mohan et al. (2017), for instance, assessed the effect of professional development programs on instructional practices. To do this, 30 teachers were chosen from two different schools. Some semi-structured interviews were then conducted with the

participants. The analysis of interviewees' answers disclosed that professional development courses can dramatically improve the quality of teaching practices. Similarly, Zaidi et al. (2018) evaluated the impact of professional training courses on teaching practices. To this end, 377 elementary school teachers were invited to answer to two surveys. The results show that professional training courses can bring about beneficial changes in teachers' pedagogical practices. In another research, Wolf and Peele (2019) inspected the influence of professional development courses on teachers' professional well-being and performance. To do so, a large sample of teachers was selected from different private and public schools in Ghana. Then, some inventories were given to participants to collect the needed information. Participants' responses to the inventories revealed that professional development programs can largely influence the well-being and performance of teachers in professional contexts. In addition, Li et al. (2022) examined the role of "continuing professional development programs" (CPDs) in Chinese instructors' self-efficacy and work engagement. For this purpose, three self-reported questionnaires about self-efficacy beliefs, work engagement, and continuing professional development programs were sent to 615 Chinese instructors. The analysis of questionnaires showed that continuing professional development programs play a key role in promoting instructors' self-efficacy and work engagement.

2.2. Teacher Work Engagement

As a job-related variable, work engagement pertains to the behavioral, emotional, and cognitive commitment of an employee to his or her profession (Bakker et al., 2011; Dai & Wang, 2023; Han & Wang, 2021; Van Beek et al., 2012). For Korunka et al. (2009), work engagement is "the deliberate provision of the available personal resources in order to take responsibility for professional practices" (p. 245). From Christian et al.'s (2011) point of view, this construct alludes to the staff's desirable and satisfying attitudes towards their vocation, which is mainly characterized by the number of resources they allocate to respond to their job demands. Referring to this definition, Timms and Brough (2013) described teacher work engagement as teachers' positive perspectives towards the teaching profession that is marked by the amount of energy they dedicate to fulfilling their students' needs and expectations. In the current research, teacher work engagement pertains to teachers' cognitive, physical, and emotional involvement in language classrooms.

The central and valuable role of teacher engagement in educational environments has been clearly explained by various researchers (Juliana et al., 2021; Knight et al., 2017; Minghui et al. 2018). For instance, Knight et al. (2017) argued that teachers' active participation in instructional settings substantially improves their professional performance. Similarly, Minghui et al. (2018) asserted that teachers' commitment to their professional role greatly contributes to their efficiency and productivity. In a similar vein, Juliana et al. (2021) maintained that instructors who display a great deal of passion and enthusiasm for teaching can successfully respond to their job requirements. Because of the significance of teacher work engagement, a large number of investigations (e.g., Dai & Wang, 2023; Derakhshan, Greenier, et al., 2022; Fathi et al., 2021; Han & Wang, 2021; Kong, 2021; Li, 2022; Mansor et al., 2021; Azari Noughabi et al., 2022; Xie, 2021; Yang, 2021; Zhang et al., 2021, among others) have probed the predictors of this psycho-emotional variable in traditional instructional contexts. Han and

Wang (2021), for example, measured the impact of teachers' self-efficacy beliefs on their work engagement. To accomplish this, two validated scales were emailed to 614 English teachers. The analysis of obtained data divulged that teacher self-efficacy can directly influence their engagement at work. Likewise, Fathi et al. (2021) tested the effect of teachers' self- and collective efficacy on their professional engagement. To this aim, three self-report measures were randomly given to 168 EFL instructors. The outcomes indicated that teachers' sense of efficacy can desirably affect their engagement in the professional environment. Furthermore, Derakhshan, Greenier, et al. (2022) assessed the impact of creativity and loving pedagogy on English teachers' engagement. For this objective, the "loving pedagogy scale", the "creativity questionnaire", and the "work engagement scale" were electronically administered to a group of ESL and EFL teachers. Moreover, Dai and Wang (2023) examined the function of English teachers' flow and proactive personality in their professional engagement. To do so, three reliable instruments, namely the "proactive personality scale", the "work-related flow inventory", and the "work engagement scale", were selected to measure the constructs under investigation. The results of these inventories disclosed that teacher flow and proactive personality dramatically contribute to increased teaching engagement.

Besides, with the importance of teacher engagement in mind, some inquiries (e.g., Chen, 2022; Keleynikov et al., 2022; Obrad & Circa, 2021) have also investigated the determinants of this construct in virtual education contexts. Obrad and Circa (2021), for example, probed the predictors of teacher professional engagement in online instructional environments in Romania. To do this, some reliable scales were given to 400 Romanian teachers. The study outcomes represented that participant viewed teachers' personal attitudes and motivation as significant determinants of their professional engagement. Moreover, Keleynikov et al. (2022) assessed the role of emotion regulation and mindfulness in enhancing online instructors' engagement. To this end, 165 preschool teachers working in online education environments were asked to take part in this inquiry. The findings of this inquiry showed that emotion regulation and mindfulness can considerably contribute to enhanced instructor engagement. In addition, Chen (2022) explored the role of principals' leadership style in promoting Chinese teachers' participation in online classes. For this purpose, two valid measures of work engagement and leadership style were distributed among 450 school teachers. The findings of this investigation indicated that leadership style can make a meaningful change in teachers' participation.

Despite these scholarly endeavors (Chen, 2022; Keleynikov et al., 2022; Obrad & Circa, 2021; Wang, 2023), the determinants of teacher engagement in online education environments are still ambiguous. To solve this ambiguity, the current qualitative study intends to identify the determinants of language teachers' engagement in online education environments. Additionally, this research attempts to probe the function of professional development programs in Chinese teachers' engagement in online English classes. With these objectives in mind, the following research questions were developed:

- I. What factors contribute to language teachers' engagement in online education environments?
- II. To what extent do teacher professional development (TPD) programs contribute to Chinese teachers' engagement in online education environments?

3. METHODS

3.1. Participants

Based on the random sampling technique, a total of 37 teachers were asked to engage in this research. They were all language teachers who instruct English as a foreign language in various educational environments (i.e., universities, schools, and language institutes) in China. More than half of the participants (N = 21) were female, and the rest (N = 16) were male. They were chosen from various age groups (Mean = 43) and educational backgrounds (Applied Linguistics, Linguistics, and English Language Translation). Finally, their teaching experience also varied between 15 and 25 years. To obey the moral principles of research, the privacy of participants was guaranteed. In fact, participants were assured that their personal information will not be divulged without their permission.

3.2. Instrument

An open-ended inventory comprising two distinct sections was utilized to identify the determinants of teacher engagement in virtual instructional contexts. In the first section, respondents were invited to submit their demographic data, including gender, age, major, academic degree, and teaching experience. In the following section, they were asked to answer two questions regarding the determinants of teacher engagement in online courses. To promote the validity of the inventory, the quality of its questions was assessed by three experts who wrote several scholarly papers on teacher work engagement. In accordance with their valuable comments and suggestions, the content and structure of the questions were fully revised. As Brown (2009) mentioned, piloting tests are of great help to researchers in enhancing the trustworthiness of data-gathering instruments. Considering this, the open-ended questionnaire was initially sent to seven non-participants who were highly similar to the main participants of this research. With respect to the piloting results, some new changes were made to the research instrument.

3.3. Data-gathering Procedure

Initially, a consent letter was shared among participants to ensure they are willing to participate in the research process. Following that, the above-mentioned questionnaire was sent to participants through WeChat messenger. All participants completed the questionnaire and returned it within two weeks.

3.4. Data Analysis

Participants' perspectives on the antecedents of teacher engagement and the predictive function of professional development programs were systematically analyzed via MAXQDA software. MAXQDA is a "Computer-Assisted Qualitative Data Analysis Software" (CAQ-DAS) that helps analysts promote the credibility and accuracy of the coding process (Baralt,

2012). In the present research, the coding process was implemented in light of Gao and Zhang's (2020) analytical approach. During the initial phase of this approach, known as the cleaning stage, the analysts went through the whole data to detect and omit the irrelevant answers. Then, throughout the coding stage, they studied the clean data to produce some tentative codes. In the next stage, which is called generating themes, the analysts classified the preliminary codes into some relevant themes. Following that, in the categorization stage, they placed each theme in a higher-order group. Finally, in the report preparation stage, the analysts offered a comprehensive report of the whole process. All these five stages were implemented by two persons with a view to increasing the credibility of the analysis (Nas-saji, 2020). To compute the agreement between these two persons, the statistical method of Krippendorff's alpha (α) was utilized. The results of this statistical measure revealed a high degree of consensus ($\alpha = 0.95$) between the analysts.

4. FINDINGS

The thematic analysis of Chinese teachers' answers to the first question produced two main themes and eight relevant subthemes, which are listed in the table below (Table 1).

Table 1. *The thematic analysis findings for the first question*

Themes	Subthemes	Frequency	Percentage
Extrinsic factors	Principals' transformational leadership	15	23%
	Effective professional development programs	14	22%
	User-friendly platforms	5	8%
	Appropriate teaching aids	5	8%
Intrinsic factors	Adequate technological knowledge	9	14%
	Adequate pedagogical knowledge	7	11%
	Positive attitudes towards online education	6	9%
	High enthusiasm for teaching	3	5%
Total		64	100%

As shown in Table 1, the majority of Chinese teachers (61%) viewed extrinsic factors, including *principals' transformational leadership*, *effective professional development programs*, *user-friendly platforms*, and *appropriate teaching aids*, as the most powerful predictors of language teachers' engagement in online courses. The first two factors, namely principals' transformational leadership and effective professional development programs, are illuminated in the following extracts:

Participant 3: *I think the transformational skills of principals can significantly enhance language teachers' work engagement.*

Participant 9: *School principals who bring meaningful changes in educational environments can notably improve the engagement of teachers in online classes.*

Participant 11: *Designing effective development programs for teachers can drastically promote their work engagement.*

Participant 14: *Professional development programs can enhance language teachers' engagement in online courses by increasing their technological knowledge.*

The other extrinsic factors, including user-friendly platforms and appropriate teaching aids, are also illustrated in the following sentences:

Participant 7: *Online education platforms that are well-designed and easy to use can encourage both teachers and students to actively participate in virtual courses.*

Participant 23: *The audio-visual teaching aids can also enhance teacher engagement in online education environments.*

Other Chinese teachers (39%) believed that intrinsic factors, including adequate technological knowledge, adequate pedagogical knowledge, positive attitudes towards online education, and high enthusiasm for teaching, can significantly enhance language teachers' work engagement. The following statements explicate these four intrinsic factors, respectively:

Participant 19: *Those teachers who know how to use online platforms for teaching are more inclined to participate in online classes.*

Participant 27: *The ability of teachers to effectively deliver the course content is also of high importance for their work engagement.*

Participant 30: *How teachers perceive online education can drastically influence their engagement in virtual courses.*

Participant 32: *The interest and enthusiasm that teachers demonstrate in educational settings can significantly predict their professional engagement.*

The following figure depicts both the external and internal determinants of language teachers' engagement in online education contexts.

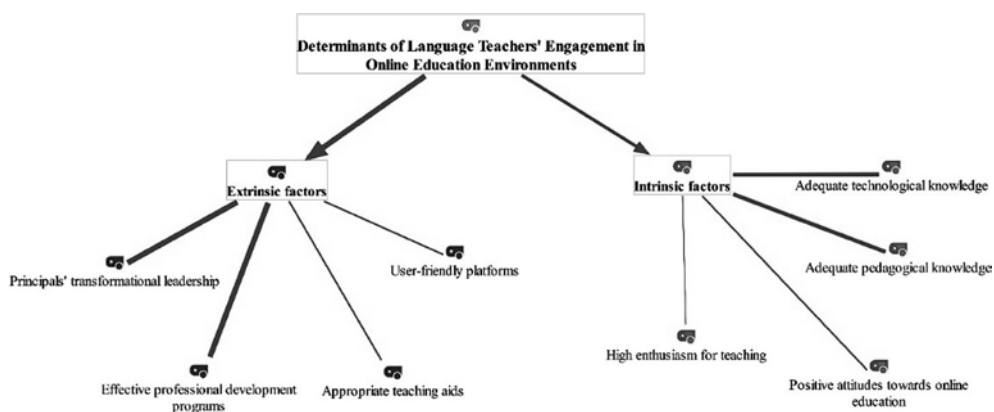


Figure 1. *The extrinsic and intrinsic determinants of teacher work engagement*

The analysis of teachers' responses to the second question yielded two major themes that are demonstrated in Table 2.

Table 2. *The thematic analysis results for the second question*

Themes	Frequency	Percentage
To a great extent	31	84%
To some extent	6	16%
Total	37	100%

As illustrated in Table 2, the majority of teachers (84%) asserted that professional development programs have a great impact on their work engagement. The following excerpts reflect teachers' perspectives on the predictive role of professional development programs.

Participant 14: *I think professional development programs remarkably enhance teachers' cognitive, emotional, and physical engagement at work.*

Participant 22: *To me, professional development programs are of great help to educational principals in improving teachers' work engagement.*

Participant 28: *Professional development programs prepare teachers to play an active role in online education contexts.*

Other Chinese teachers (16%) declared that professional development programs play some role in improving their work engagement. To illustrate:

Participant 2: *Teacher work engagement may be partly affected by professional development programs.*

Participant 16: *I think professional development programs are somehow influential in teachers' emotional and physical engagement.*

5. DISCUSSION

This inquiry was undertaken to locate the determinants of language teachers' engagement in virtual classes and probe the role of professional development programs in promoting Chinese teachers' engagement in online English classes. To accomplish these objectives, an open-ended inventory was given to 37 English teachers. The analysis of respondents' perspectives on the determinants of teacher engagement revealed that this construct is subject to various intrinsic and extrinsic factors (Figure 1). As to the intrinsic determinants of teacher engagement, the analysis outcomes indicated that adequate technological knowledge, adequate pedagogical knowledge, positive attitudes towards online education, and high enthusiasm for teaching can significantly contribute to enhanced teacher engagement.

The finding of the study regarding the determining function of teachers' technological and pedagogical knowledge is in agreement with Zhang et al.'s (2021) outcomes, which illuminated that the knowledge of instructors can make a considerable change in their professional engagement. This finding also mirrors Nazari et al.'s results, which represented

that the “technological pedagogical content knowledge” (TPACK) of English teachers can directly influence their involvement in online courses. Furthermore, the study outcome on the predictive role of teachers’ positive attitudes accords with Obrad and Circa’s (2021) results, which divulged that the personal attitude of teachers is a powerful predictor of their work engagement. Additionally, the result of the current research about the significant role of enthusiasm in predicting teacher engagement seems to be consistent with the ideas of Juliana et al. (2021), who argued that the passion and enthusiasm of teachers in working environments have a desirable impact on their performance. Besides, the analysis results regarding the extrinsic determinants of teacher engagement revealed that *principals’ transformational leadership, effective professional development programs, user-friendly platforms, and appropriate teaching aids* can favorably predict teacher engagement.

The determining role of principals’ transformational leadership may be justified by some earlier observations (e.g., Arifin et al., 2014; Chen, 2022; Mansor et al., 2021), which manifested that principals’ leadership styles can affect instructors’ engagement in educational environments. Moreover, the desired impact of professional development programs on teacher work engagement can be confirmed by Li et al.’s (2022) outcomes, which showed that ‘continuing professional development programs can notably raise teachers’ work engagement. This finding also has some similarities with Wolf and Peele’s (2019) results, which indicated that professional development programs can positively affect teachers’ performance in working environments. Finally, the present investigation’s outcomes concerning the key role of user-friendly platforms and appropriate teaching aids in predicting teacher engagement might be readily explicated by the fact that efficient tools and technologies are what teachers need to actively participate in online instructional contexts (Hol & Aydin, 2020). In addition, the analysis of Chinese English teachers’ standpoints on the role of professional development programs in promoting their engagement in online courses demonstrated that the majority of teachers viewed professional development programs as a strong predictor of teaching engagement. This finding gives credence to the ideas of Ke et al. (2019), who submitted that engaging in formal or informal professional development programs inspires instructors to enthusiastically participate in their workplace.

6. CONCLUSION, IMPLICATIONS, AND LIMITATIONS

This qualitative study was designed to look into Chinese English teachers’ perspectives on the predictors of work engagement and the predictive role of professional development programs. The most tangible finding to arise from this qualitative study was that language teachers’ engagement in online courses is subject to a variety of extrinsic and intrinsic elements. Returning to the outcomes of data analysis, it is possible to state that the leadership style of educational principals, professional development programs, online education platforms, teaching aids, technological knowledge, pedagogical knowledge, personal attitudes, and teaching enthusiasm can considerably affect teacher engagement in online classrooms. The second major finding to emerge from this research was that professional development programs can greatly contribute to language teachers’ work engagement.

These findings may add substantially to educational principals’ understanding of the determinants of teacher work engagement. With respect to the study outcomes, educational

principals play a key role in improving language teachers' professional engagement. As shown in this research, educational principals should use a transformational leadership style to inspire positive feelings in their instructors. These positive feelings will encourage teachers to invest more time and energy in their workplace. For the same purpose, they need to design some effective professional development programs for their instructors. Additionally, they are required to provide their instructors with appropriate teaching aids to help them enhance their professional engagement. Besides, the present study outcomes may be illuminating for online language teachers as well. With the role of intrinsic factors in mind, online instructors should improve their technological and pedagogical knowledge to raise their emotional, physical, and cognitive engagement in the working environment.

Finally, several limitations need to be noted regarding the present inquiry outcomes. First, the data were entirely gathered from English language instructors. Thus, the study outcomes should be extrapolated to other language instructors with caution. To ensure the generalizability of outcomes, future inquiries also need to consider the viewpoints of other language teachers. Furthermore, in the current research, an open-ended inventory was used to evaluate participants' standpoints. Other data-gathering instruments, including interviews and diary writings, would be of great help to future scholars in collecting more comprehensive data. In addition, this investigation disregarded the potential influence of teaching experience on language teachers' work engagement. Future studies could consider the influence of this situational variable on language instructors' professional engagement. What more can be sought in future studies as a new line of research is to employ innovative approaches to delve into the multidimensional psycho-emotional aspects of teacher education (see Derakhshan et al., 2023). Teacher work engagement can be investigated concerning some other factors rooted in positive psychology such as well-being, resilience, immunity, loving pedagogy, organizational commitment, enjoyment, and emotion regulation (Derakhshan, 2022; Derakhshan, Dewaele, et al., 2022; Valente et al., 2022; Wang, Derakhshan, Rahimpour, 2022; Wang et al., 2021).

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