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EFL TEACHER PROFESSIONALISM AND AGENCY IN ADDIS ABABA WITH IMPLICATIONS FOR DIGITAL PROFESSIONAL LEARNING

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ABSTRACT

This study examines how English as a foreign language (EFL) teachers in Addis Ababa understand professionalism and how their accounts relate to professional development represented in school documents. An interpretive qualitative inquiry informed by hermeneutic phenomenology drew on interviews with 16 government secondary school teachers, two focus groups of four teachers each, and eight school documents. Analysis examined accounts of commitment, knowledge, pedagogical judgement, and continuing professional development alongside institutional expectations. Teachers described professionalism through care, subject expertise, responsive teaching, and continued learning. They valued practical development and collegial support but questioned activities experienced as paperwork. Documents combined prescribed requirements, collaboration, and opportunities for personal choice, complicating a binary distinction between supportive and controlling schools. References to online searching, videos, technology priorities, and Telegram indicated possible connections with digital professional learning but did not establish its implementation or effectiveness. Self-reports and selected documents cannot establish classroom outcomes, school-wide practices, or the prevalence of particular beliefs. The findings support piloting development records that connect teachers' priorities with classroom inquiry and collegial feedback. Digital formats should be evaluated for accessibility, workload, and opportunities for professional judgement. The study offers context-specific insights into the relationship between teachers' expressed commitments and institutional representations of development, informing further research on digitally supported language teacher learning.

Keyword: continuing professional development; EFL teachers; professional agency; teacher professionalism.

I. INTRODUCTION

Teachers' accounts of professionalism help clarify what professional development should support. In English as a foreign language (EFL) education, teachers draw on language knowledge, respond to learners, and

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decide how to teach particular content. They also encounter institutional requirements to document improvement. These activities can reinforce one another, but completing a record does not necessarily explain how a teacher learns or exercises judgement. This study examines that relationship through the accounts of government secondary school EFL teachers in Addis Ababa and the continuing professional development (CPD) documents associated with eight schools. It considers the meanings teachers assign to professional work and how that work is represented institutionally.

Professionalism, professional identity, and professional development are related but distinct. Professionalism concerns expectations about appropriate knowledge, conduct, judgement, and responsibility. Professional identity concerns teachers' understandings of themselves in relation to their work and its social context (Aziz, 2026, Beijaard et al., 2004). Professional development encompasses activities and processes through which teachers extend their capacities. Conflating these concepts can obscure a practical problem. A development activity may fulfil an institutional requirement while contributing little to a teacher's professional purpose. Conversely, learning from a colleague or an independently selected resource may matter to a teacher without being recognised in a formal record.

Sockett's (1993) account of the moral basis of teacher professionalism provides the conceptual starting point. Tichenor and Tichenor's (2005) application of this framework addresses character, continuing improvement, subject expertise, pedagogical knowledge, and responsibilities beyond classroom instruction. Shulman (1986, 1987) complements this perspective by distinguishing knowledge of subject matter from the capacity to make it teachable. For language teachers, Richards (2017) connects proficiency with the pedagogical use of English. These perspectives frame questions about teachers' priorities without treating descriptions of desirable competencies as evidence that participants possess them.

Professional agency concerns teachers' capacity to form and pursue judgements within particular conditions. An ecological account treats agency as an achievement shaped by experience, purposes, and opportunities, rather than a fixed personal attribute (Priestley et al., 2015). This distinction matters when interpreting CPD records. A form may invite personal choice without showing whether teachers exercised meaningful influence; prescribed activities may also support worthwhile collective work. Evetts (2011) distinguishes organisational and occupational forms of professionalism, while Ball (2003) examines pressures associated with performativity. Together, these perspectives support examining accountability and judgement without classifying schools into mutually exclusive categories.

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Professional learning research also challenges an individualised account of improvement. Hargreaves (2000) situates changing forms of professionalism within historical and organisational contexts, while Mann (2005) emphasises language teachers' perspectives on continuing development. Research on professional learning communities and public discussion of practice identifies opportunities for colleagues to examine teaching together (Lieberman & Pointer Mace, 2010; Stoll et al., 2006). However, listing collaboration, reflection, or workshops in a programme description does not demonstrate effectiveness. Sims and Fletcher-Wood (2021) question whether familiar programme characteristics adequately explain why professional development works. Evidence about participation, learning, and classroom consequences remains necessary.

Digital professional learning raises further questions about the support teachers receive and how their learning is recognised. Reviews distinguish formally organised online communities from groups developed by teachers themselves (Lantz-Andersson et al., 2018). Dille and Røkenes (2021) examine support and context in formal online communities, and Bragg et al. (2021) consider the design and delivery of online professional development. Jin et al. (2024) discuss technological affordances for resource sharing, collaboration, and support. Across this literature, access to a platform does not itself establish professional learning. Educational value depends on how participation relates to teachers' purposes and working conditions.

Language teacher research further specifies these questions. Bahari et al. (2022) review opportunities and challenges in technology use for language teacher education and development. Ito (2023) examines professional and emotional support in a technology-focused Facebook community during a crisis, whereas Hu and Shen (2024) review agency in online foreign language teaching during and after the pandemic. These settings differ from the schools studied here. Marisa et al. (2024) investigate digital proficiency and EFL teachers' professional identity in a small qualitative study, supporting attention to how teachers interpret digital work rather than assuming a uniform professional meaning.

The present study examines how accounts of professional commitment, practical learning, and institutional requirements relate to development represented in documents from selected Addis Ababa schools. Its contribution lies in interpreting the relationship between teachers' accounts and documentary representations within this setting. Technology is considered where the evidence supports it, while digital professional learning remains an implication for further investigation rather than the primary phenomenon originally studied.

Two research questions guide the analysis. First, how do participating EFL teachers understand professionalism through accounts of their work

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and development? Second, what relationships and tensions emerge when these accounts are considered alongside the selected school CPD documents? The questions accommodate disagreement, changing commitments, and mixed documentary features. They concern reported meanings and representations, without measuring teaching quality, CPD impact, or the effectiveness of a digital intervention.

II. METHOD

Research orientation and reflexivity

The study adopted an interpretive qualitative orientation informed by hermeneutic phenomenology. This orientation attends to meaning within participants' circumstances and recognises that interpretation involves prior understanding (Annells, 1996; Heidegger, 1927/1962). It supports examining teachers' descriptions of professional work, although the material contains more statements of belief than detailed accounts of classroom episodes. The analysis therefore addresses expressed professional meanings without claiming an invariant phenomenological essence. Attention to concrete experience remains an important methodological consideration (van Manen, 2014).

The lead researcher had 19 years of teaching experience in Ethiopian public and private education. This background supported contextual understanding but also risked introducing personal assumptions into the interpretation. Reported reflexive practices included a journal of assumptions and developing interpretations, discussion with a second analyst who was an assistant professor in English language teaching (ELT), and attention to how familiarity influenced questioning. These practices supported reflection without eliminating interpretive influence. The researcher's relationships with participants and any role in evaluating their work remain insufficiently documented.

Participants and sources

Purposive, criterion-based sampling recruited 16 EFL teachers from government secondary schools. The interview group comprised 10 men and six women with 5–34 years of teaching experience; nine held bachelor's degrees and seven held master's degrees. Two schools were selected in each of four sub-cities, namely Yeka, Gulele, Arada, and Akaki Kality. This eight-school interview sample differed in geographic coverage from the focus groups. These characteristics describe the participating group and do not establish representativeness across Addis Ababa.

Two focus group discussions (FGDs) each involved four teachers. The first included one teacher from each interview sub-city; the second included four teachers from Addis Ketema. Although the eight focus-group

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participants were described as additional, overlap with the interview sample remains unconfirmed. The samples are therefore reported separately. Recruitment procedures, eligibility criteria beyond teaching role, and non-participation were insufficiently specified to assess selection effects. Sample adequacy is considered in relation to the focused aims and available accounts, without claiming demonstrated saturation or information power (Malterud et al., 2016).

Data generation and document selection

Individual semi-structured interviews lasted 18–40 minutes and took place privately, face to face, in participants' schools. They addressed professionalism, professional identity, teacher qualities, and development experiences, and were audio-recorded with consent. The analysis was described as using verbatim material. However, reporting of collection dates, interview language, transcription procedures, and translation checks is incomplete. Focus-group duration, moderation, and question sequence are also insufficiently documented, limiting assessment of how questioning and group interaction shaped the accounts.

Eight CPD-related documents, one associated with each sampled school, formed the documentary corpus. Although collectively described as portfolios, they comprised different institutional artefacts, including a blank supervision checklist. Analysis involved skimming, close reading, and interpretation of recurring representations of professional work, following Bowen's (2009) general approach to qualitative document analysis. Dates, authorship, selection criteria, and completion status remain incompletely documented. Table 1 summarises the available descriptions and excerpts and identifies the limits of interpretation.

Analysis and interpretive limits

The reported analytic sequence involved repeated reading, initial notes, identification of themes within transcripts, discussion with the second analyst, clustering into categories, and preparation of thematic tables. Four categories organise the results, namely care and commitment, subject knowledge, pedagogical judgement, and continuing development. These correspond conceptually to four concerns discussed by Tichenor and Tichenor (2005). Responsibilities beyond the classroom appear across collaborative learning and documentary analysis. Status and recognition provide additional interpretive concerns but are not attributed to Sockett as a fifth dimension. This mapping explains the presentation of findings without establishing a fully documented deductive coding procedure.

The analysis recognises researcher judgement as part of interpretation. Braun and Clarke (2019) explain why quality criteria should be consistent with an analytic approach; their work is used here to clarify that principle, without identifying this study as reflexive thematic analysis. Findings are

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supported by attributed extracts and explicit interpretive limits. The available records do not establish independent coding units, frequency denominators, or a comparable school-rating rubric, so inter-coder statistics, theme frequencies, and ordinal school ratings are not used to support the findings. Incomplete coding records remain a reporting limitation.

Reported credibility procedures included a reflexive journal, analyst discussion, and member checks with five participants. The content of those checks and resulting changes are not documented, limiting their value as evidence of validation. Comparing interviews, focus-group excerpts, and documents can reveal convergence and tension but does not guarantee credibility (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Without verified links between individual teachers and particular documents, the synthesis concerns patterns across sources rather than corroboration within matched cases. Reporting limitations are considered against the Consolidated Criteria for Reporting Qualitative Research (COREQ) and the Standards for Reporting Qualitative Research (O'Brien et al., 2014; Tong et al., 2007).

Ethical considerations

The study reports review by a university departmental research committee and access permission from the city education bureau, sub-city offices, and school principals. Administrative permission is distinguished from research ethics approval; the committee decision, date, and reference number remain unconfirmed. Participants reportedly gave informed consent and received information about voluntary participation, withdrawal, and confidentiality. Records were stored on password-protected computers accessible to the research team. Interview identifiers T1–T16 are retained. Focus-group labels use FGD with the original participant numbers, pending roster reconciliation. Potentially identifying organisational positions are omitted from quotations.

III. RESULTS

Care and commitment as professional expectations

Teachers described professionalism through responsibility towards learners and attachment to teaching. T2 connected care with personal experience: "When you're a teacher, you have to have a good heart. You have to be passionate. You have to be... You have to have intrinsic motivation... Even being a mother helped me a lot to be a good teacher." Parenthood informs this participant's understanding of care; the account does not establish that caring is innate or that a particular family role is necessary for professionalism.

T14 similarly invoked family relationships: "A teacher has to be friendly, has to be motherly, fatherly, sisterly for his students, brotherly also." This

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language explains how the participant understood attentiveness to learners, without establishing a universal expectation of unlimited availability. T9's emphasis on being "a good example" extends responsibility to public conduct. T16's reference to teachers being "disciplined" concerns teachers' own behaviour and provides no evidence about punishment or its effects on achievement.

T6 described a changing relationship with teaching: "Teaching for me especially is a profession for me. It's not an occupation. But when I started teaching it was an occupation for me. But gradually teaching becomes a profession for me." The same work acquired a different meaning over time, suggesting that commitment can develop beyond initial reasons for entering employment. The passage does not identify the experiences responsible for this change, so its causes remain open.

Participants' distinction between "profession" and "occupation" expresses their own evaluations, rather than a sociological classification excluding paid work from professionalism. T1's phrase "a lovely sacrification" conveys commitment alongside substantial effort. T4 connected development with material support: "If there is enough income or salaries... if I get the facilities, I want to improve my professional development." These accounts show that commitment and material needs can coexist. They do not justify treating concern about remuneration as weak professionalism or recommending sacrifice as a response to inadequate support.

Subject knowledge as an ongoing responsibility

Teachers valued subject knowledge and the ability to use English for instruction. Their statements express expectations and perceived needs rather than assessed proficiency. T5 identified a development priority: "I want to improve my speaking skill and writing skill. If I get an opportunity, this is my prior to develop." Language development appears as a professional aspiration, without establishing the participant's current level. The study included no proficiency testing and cannot infer competence or deficiency from the grammar of transcribed speech.

T3 described self-directed learning: "I always update myself through doing action research on professional development, also searching from online to reading vocabulary." This is an account of online searching alongside action research and vocabulary study; the resources, frequency, and outcomes are unspecified. T2 also associated English knowledge with cultural understanding. That view neither establishes a single culture attached to English nor demonstrates intercultural competence. Across these examples, knowledge is presented as a continuing responsibility rather than an achievement secured permanently by certification.

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Pedagogical judgement and classroom relationships

Accounts of pedagogy connected preparation with responses to classroom circumstances. T10 explained:

> *Teaching may change in situation, it may be situational. According to your classroom situation, you may use different methods to teach the students. So, it's difficult to list this, this, this, this, but there are different. So, if you are well organized in different situations, you are a professional*.

This account values situational judgement and a repertoire of methods, without demonstrating their successful use in observed teaching.

T15 described adapting methods when students appeared disengaged: "If you don't change the methodology, okay? everyone cannot understand what you say... It depends on the feeling of the student. If the students are boring, okay, why don't you change the method?" This statement connects attention to students with pedagogical decisions without supporting fixed learning-style classifications. T12 prioritised management: "The first and the basic qualities is classroom management, manage students, control students, then deliver quality lessons for the learners. I think this is the basic quality of teaching." The emphasis on control introduces a tension with care and responsiveness. Without observations or student perspectives, it remains unclear how these priorities were reconciled in practice.

Focus-group contributions are presented as attributed accounts. FGD1_T3 associated certification with willingness to change and use different teaching methods. FGD2_T8 stated: "Teachers should be knowledgeable, and use different systems to manage the classroom. And always should be learner." These contributions connect knowledge, management, and continued learning. Because the extracts do not preserve turn-taking, disagreement, or responses to other speakers, they cannot establish consensus or show how meanings were jointly negotiated.

Professional learning and the relevance of CPD

Participants regarded continued learning as a professional responsibility. T1 explained: "We have to improve our skills and knowledge. It is not stagnant knowledge or it is not fixed. So it's not routine activity." Accounts included reading, collegial exchange, and association activities. T10 described learning about lesson planning from experienced English department colleagues. FGD1_T2 reported: "When I participated in ELPA, I got a lot of experience from that association. So that helps me to enhance my teaching techniques." ELPA is retained as spoken. The account indicates perceived value in association participation, without establishing comparative effectiveness against government provision.

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Teachers questioned the relevance of some formal activities. T5 stated: "To tell you frankly, I didn't get anything from that in-service program because the program itself was not attractive. So I didn't get anything to apply in my class." T6 requested more practical content after describing training as disconnected from classroom work. T2 characterised CPD as "That's just the paperwork for me", emphasising documentation experienced as detached from practice. These criticisms concern particular reported experiences and do not establish that all programmes were ineffective or that documentation necessarily prevents learning.

Digital activity formed part of these accounts of self-directed development. Alongside T3's online searching, T4 described consulting internet sources to update knowledge. These accounts identify technology as a possible resource but do not establish a shared digital learning community, systematic webinar participation, or improvements in teaching attributable to technology. They distinguish reported resource use from demonstrated professional learning outcomes.

Documentary representations of professional work

The documents varied in how they recorded or prescribed development. Table 1 identifies the material associated with each school and the interpretations supported by its description. Differences in purpose and completion status preclude treating these features as comparable measures of school quality. Evidence about a selected document is therefore distinguished from conclusions about the teachers or school associated with it.

Table 1-Documentary evidence and limits of interpretation

School	Reported documentary feature	Interpretive limit
1	Prescribed CPD modules and institutional schedules.	Personal agency is not documented in the selected material; its absence in practice cannot be inferred.
2	Plans for work with students, parents, a psychologist and colleagues; videos and evaluation activities.	Planned activities and hours do not demonstrate implementation or outcomes.
3	Blank supervision checklist with behavioural categories and no recorded teacher narrative.	The form's design can be described; completed use and teachers' experiences are unknown.
4	Common priorities, a personal third topic, technology development and exchange of ideas.	Authorship and enactment of personal choice require confirmation; prescribed and elective features coexist.

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5	Incomplete session-purpose entries; other wording is unclear.	Blank or ambiguous text cannot establish school-wide suppression of professional identity.
6	Generic improvement aims and incomplete or mismatched entries about problems encountered.	Completion status and explanations for missing information are unknown.
7	Collective CPD arrangements represented through institutional planning.	Collective wording does not establish that individual judgement was excluded.
8	Repeated references to Telegram and communication with parents.	Purpose, use and quality of the communication are not demonstrated by repeated entries.

School 4's document combines prescribed requirements with personal choice. It states that "Each teacher will add a personal third topic" and includes the priority "Developing my skills to transform documents and information through technology". References to communication and exchanging ideas further suggest scope for participation. However, the pronoun "my" may derive from a template and cannot establish individual authorship or enacted agency. The document identifies a possible opportunity for choice; teachers' experiences of that opportunity remain unknown.

School 2 records planned activities involving students, parents, a psychologist, and colleagues. It allocates eight hours to preparing and teaching with short videos and notes, two hours to evaluating work before and after an intervention, and five hours to collaborative planning, observation, and feedback. These allocations envisage practical and relational activity but do not demonstrate completed participation or student benefits. The reference to videos establishes a planned technological component, without evidence of an evaluated intervention.

Other documents offer less detail about personal reflection. School 3's blank checklist contains behavioural categories without teacher narratives; an unused form cannot establish the absence of reflection elsewhere. Incomplete entries in Schools 5 and 6 could reflect unfinished work, a template, or the purpose of document selection. School 8's references to Telegram and parent communication could support coordination or relational work as well as reporting. Repetition alone does not establish communication quality. These alternatives caution against interpreting documentary omissions as intentional suppression of teacher voice.

Across sources, teachers' priorities and documentary representations were related in varied ways. Teachers emphasised practical relevance, care, and opportunities to learn; documents differed in how explicitly they

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represented these concerns. School 4 illustrates the coexistence of compliance and choice within one artefact. However, no verified links permit attributing an individual teacher's experience to a particular school record. The findings raise questions about institutional recognition of professionalism while leaving the relationship between documentation and everyday practice open to further investigation.

IV. Discussion

Professional commitment and institutional recognition

Participants located professionalism in responsibility towards learners, knowledge, pedagogical judgement, and continued development. Sockett's (1993) moral perspective helps interpret care and responsibility, while Shulman (1987) clarifies the relationship between subject expertise and pedagogical knowledge. The four categories organise these accounts without constituting a revised theory of professionalism. Responsibilities beyond the classroom appear in collegial and association participation, while status and recognition raise further questions about professional standing, remuneration, and support.

T6's account presents commitment as developing over time. Alongside research on professional identity, it suggests that the meanings attached to teaching can change during a career (Beijaard et al., 2004). Although this account cannot establish a shared trajectory, it challenges a fixed classification of teachers as intrinsically committed or merely employed. Deci and Ryan (2000) provide a basis for distinguishing reasons for action without dismissing material support. In this study, commitment was compatible with concern about income and facilities. The findings therefore offer no justification for policies that rely on teachers' willingness to sacrifice.

The relationship between accountability and agency is similarly complex. Teachers' criticisms of paperwork resonate with concerns about performativity (Ball, 2003), yet the documents do not demonstrate uniform identity suppression. School 4 combines prescribed priorities with a personal topic, and School 2 includes relational and collaborative activities. Evetts's (2011) distinction between forms of professionalism helps interpret these combinations. An ecological account directs attention to whether teachers can exercise judgement within their actual conditions (Priestley et al., 2015). Establishing whether documentary invitations become experienced opportunities requires accounts linked to the relevant records.

The technology evidence is limited but relevant to questions about professional learning. Teachers described online searching as a way to update knowledge, and documents referred to technology priorities, videos, and Telegram communication. These references identify possible functions

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without establishing a coherent digital programme or a shared level of digital competence. Replacing a paper form with an online form may preserve existing reporting demands. The value of technology consequently depends on the inquiry, exchange, and feedback it enables within teachers' working relationships.

Research on professional learning networks describes participation across platforms that combines social and professional purposes (Trust et al., 2016). Reviews identify opportunities for resource sharing and support alongside questions about organisation and sustained participation (Dille & Røkenes, 2021; Jin et al., 2024). These studies support investigating digital resources within teachers' broader learning relationships, without establishing that the Addis Ababa participants experienced equivalent opportunities. Ito (2023) and Hu and Shen (2024) similarly provide comparative questions about support and agency, while differences between their settings and the present study limit direct transfer of conclusions.

An initial pilot could use a short digital or paper record asking teachers to identify a classroom concern, explain their chosen response, and discuss evidence with a colleague. For speaking instruction, for example, teachers could record why they selected a resource and what classroom information would help assess its usefulness. This proposal was not implemented in the study. Teachers should help determine what is recorded and who can access it. A concise record accompanied by useful feedback may serve professional decisions better than extensive entries alone.

Pilot evaluation should examine accessibility, workload, participation, and feedback quality before claiming instructional benefits. Costs and connectivity require direct assessment, and a feasible non-digital option should be available where necessary. Bahari et al. (2022) and Bragg et al. (2021) support attention to the design and conditions of technology-supported development. Marisa et al. (2024) also suggest investigating identity alongside digital proficiency, although their small qualitative study cannot establish a general causal relationship.

CPD design and future inquiry

Accounts of collegial learning and association participation identify settings where teachers already seek relevant support. Schools could examine whether development arrangements allow time for discussing classroom concerns and receiving usable feedback. This proposal draws on participants' preferences and professional learning research (Lieberman & Pointer Mace, 2010; Stoll et al., 2006), rather than an observed programme effect. Evaluation should consider feasible alternatives, including improvements to existing provision. As Sims and Fletcher-Wood (2021) caution, adopting familiar programme features does not establish effectiveness.

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Future research could link interviews with dated CPD records, observations, and teachers' subsequent accounts of the same activity. This would help distinguish intended activities, completed participation, and changes in practice. Studies with technology as their primary focus should examine tool selection and use, access conditions, participation, and consequences for agency. Such evidence could test whether digital records expand opportunities to explain professional decisions or increase reporting demands. These questions arise from the present findings but remain empirically unresolved.

The purposively selected sample cannot establish the prevalence of particular views across Addis Ababa or Ethiopia. Retrospective accounts capture beliefs and perceived experiences, with limited descriptions of specific classroom episodes and no independent observations or student outcomes. Focus-group extracts do not preserve sufficient interaction to assess collective meaning-making. Unequal interview lengths and incomplete reporting of recruitment, language, and transcription limit comparison. Unconfirmed overlap between interview and focus-group participants also prevents a verified total of unique participants.

Documents differed in genre and completion status, while their dates, authorship, and selection remain incompletely documented. A single artefact cannot represent a school's professional culture. Missing participant-to-document links prevent comparisons of matched cases; incomplete coding records preclude verification of numerical frequencies, ratings, or inter-coder statistics. The limited technology evidence cannot establish digital competence, access inequalities, or effectiveness. Transferability depends on contextual similarity and does not support treating the Global South as homogeneous. Further interpretation requires fuller source records and attention to discrepant cases.

Digital Professional Agency Beyond Administrative Visibility

The findings invite a distinction between using digital resources and exercising professional agency through them. Teachers' references to online searching, together with documentary mentions of videos and Telegram, indicate contact with technology but reveal little about control over its educational purposes. Bahari et al. (2022) identify both affordances and challenges in digital resources for language teacher development. Read alongside this review, the present evidence suggests that access should be treated as an enabling condition whose professional value requires further investigation. Downloading materials may support informed teaching, yet it may also leave existing routines unchanged. The relevant question concerns how teachers select, evaluate, adapt, and justify resources.

This distinction complicates approaches that equate digital professionalism with accumulating technical responsibilities. Hu and Shen

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(2024) identify interconnected roles in online foreign language teaching, including designing, communicating, assessing, and facilitating. Their ecological perspective provides a comparison, although their review concerns college teaching during the pandemic rather than these secondary schools. Extending this perspective, performing more digital tasks need not mean possessing greater agency. Agency would require meaningful influence over priorities and pedagogical decisions. Participants' emphasis on practical relevance therefore suggests evaluating digital development through the decisions teachers can explain and negotiate, rather than the number of platforms they use.

Institutional recognition introduces a tension between making professional learning visible and reducing it to measurable activity. Jin et al. (2024) identify technological affordances that support collaboration, knowledge sharing, rapid assistance, and varied participation in online professional learning communities. These possibilities are relevant to the documentary references to communication, but their availability does not establish their enactment. A digital record could preserve teachers' explanations and invite feedback; alternatively, completion counts could become substitutes for examining professional reasoning. The latter is an interpretive possibility, not an observed outcome here. Evaluating digital documentation consequently requires attention to who defines worthwhile participation and how recorded contributions are judged.

The relationship between support and autonomy requires qualification. Dille and Røkenes (2021) emphasise scaffolding, facilitation, contextual conditions, and shared understanding in formally organised online teacher development. This challenges any assumption that professional agency emerges simply when institutions withdraw direction. In the present study, teachers valued collegial learning while questioning activities experienced as irrelevant paperwork. These accounts support distinguishing guidance that helps teachers investigate classroom concerns from requirements that merely demand completion. Productive support would make purposes negotiable and feedback usable. Whether existing arrangements achieve this remains unresolved because the available interviews and documents do not establish sustained interactions between particular teachers and facilitators.

Nor should online communities be romanticised as inherently collaborative alternatives to institutional provision. Ito (2023) found professional and emotional support within a Facebook language teacher community during a crisis, using evidence from posts, questionnaires, and interviews. Interactional evidence matters because participation in a communication channel cannot itself demonstrate reciprocal learning. Telegram references in the present documents therefore warrant investigation rather than classification as an established professional community. Future analysis should examine whose questions receive

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responses, whether advice prompts pedagogical reconsideration, and whether teachers can express uncertainty without damaging professional standing. These questions connect collaboration with recognition while avoiding unsupported claims about community quality.

Professional identity complicates the evaluation of digitally mediated agency. Marisa et al. (2024), examining five EFL teachers, relate digital competence to communication, collaboration, reflective practice, and teachers' interpretations of their professional roles. Their findings offer sensitising concepts rather than a basis for generalising to Addis Ababa. Here, care, subject knowledge, and responsiveness remained central to participants' accounts. A digital development initiative that rewards visible technical performance while overlooking these commitments could create tensions in professional recognition. Conversely, teachers might appropriate accessible tools to express existing commitments. Determining which interpretation applies requires accounts linking particular technological choices with teachers' purposes and subsequent experiences.

Design quality must be considered alongside the strength of evidence used to justify digital reform. Bragg et al. (2021) identify relevant design elements in online professional development while highlighting methodological weaknesses in the underlying research. Their review cautions against treating attractive programme features as proof of improvement. Applied here, a proposed digital CPD record should be evaluated against existing provision, including feasible paper alternatives. Evidence should address the usefulness of feedback, opportunities to revise teaching decisions, and burdens on participants. Connectivity, time, and affordability require direct assessment; they cannot be assumed to explain participants' experiences solely because the study concerns an Ethiopian setting.

These arguments position digital professional agency as a question about the conditions under which teachers can articulate, examine, and revise professional judgements. The study contributes evidence of priorities that future digital initiatives should address, rather than evidence that those initiatives already work. A necessary next step is to connect teachers' explanations with documented exchanges and classroom decisions. This would distinguish administrative visibility from opportunities for professional learning without assuming that either digitalisation or institutional documentation necessarily promotes or restricts agency.

V. Conclusion

Participating EFL teachers described professionalism through care, knowledge, pedagogical judgement, and continued learning. Their accounts

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connect commitment with development responsive to classroom needs. School documents offer varied opportunities to represent these priorities, combining institutional requirements, relational activities, and personal choice. The findings support examining how development arrangements recognise professional judgement, without dividing schools into uniformly supportive or suppressive categories. References to online searching, videos, technology priorities, and Telegram provide starting points for research on digital professional learning, without establishing an effective digital model. Further inquiry should involve teachers in assessing whether accessible documentation and feedback can support classroom investigation without increasing unnecessary work. Any pilot requires evidence of participation and learning before improvements in teaching can be claimed. The study contributes a contextual interpretation of professional meanings and their documentary representation, subject to the methodological limitations identified above.

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