



EFL teachers' perceptions of professional development activities and their effects in a non-Anglosphere context

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ABSTRACT

Providing teachers with adequate professional development (PD) is a central tenet to enhance education quality. In Vietnam, despite the blossoming of PD activities promoted over the past decade, the central question of how effectively these existing activities facilitate changes in teachers' practice has been under-researched. This mixed-method study responded to the scarcity in understanding the effectiveness of PD activities in the Vietnamese setting by employing a questionnaire administered to 80 high school teachers and six semi-structured interviews. Evidence from the questionnaire and interviews revealed that EFL teachers participated in PD activities on an occasional basis. Institution-internal or in-house professional activities were most common, while joining a professional affiliation such as a TESOL association was the rarest. Also, PD activities have positively reinforced the teachers' language proficiency, teaching practice, and planning practical lessons to meet students' learning needs. The discussions and recommendations are made for enhancing the quality of PD activities.

Keywords

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EFL teachers' perceptions,
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Introduction

Over the past ten years, the Vietnamese Ministry of Education and Training (MoET) has put massive efforts into the improvement of education through numerous reforms and initiatives implemented at both national and provincial levels. Language teaching and learning has also undergone essential innovations in compliance with this trend with the revised curricula and new textbook series. The costly National Foreign Language 2020 Project could be a typical example of the Vietnamese government's strong commitment to boost the learning outcomes achieved by learners across different education levels. Yet, in any reforms, teachers inevitably play a central role, for they are the ones that execute the demanded standards in the classroom (Helmer et al., 2011; Thao & Mai, 2022). In other words, the success of such ambitious educational reforms depends mainly on teachers' qualifications and teaching performance. This, in turn, places a strong emphasis on the quality of teacher training programs offered to

pre-service teachers and professional development (PD) programs that in-service teachers can access.

An extensive body of literature has strongly supported the value of PD activities. Knapp (2003), for instance, maintains that PD is closely linked to the improvement in teaching since such opportunities enable teachers to update professional knowledge and skills. Given the ever-rising expectations from key stakeholders, including policymakers, parents, and learners, securing chances for obtaining up-to-date expertise is of crucial importance if teachers wish to stay employable as well as competently need the ever-growing demands of the society (e.g., Guskey, 2002; Borko, 2004; Mann, 2005; Phan et al., 2018; Roemer, 2021). In other words, the higher the social requirements are, the more EFL teachers need to be involved in PD activities. In this sense, attending PD activities ultimately contributes to teacher PD and helps them achieve career sustainability.

Teachers' attitudes towards and motivation for participating in teacher training have been discussed in previous studies (e.g., Brisk, 1998; Karabenick & Noda, 2004). Teachers' attitudes and professional knowledge are equally essential to provide students who have different learning styles with high-quality instructions (Brisk, 1998). According to Karabenick and Noda (2004), teachers' attitudes remarkably affect their motivation for promoting their students' learning motives and achievements. In addition, teachers' attitudes towards English teaching and learning significantly affect their desire to partake in PD activities in order to better their students' learning outcomes (Karabenick & Noda, 2004). In other words, teachers' beliefs of the values that PD activities can underpin their willingness to participate in PD in practice.

Teachers' beliefs about PD have been investigated in a relatively extensive volume of recent studies (e.g., Alibakhshi & Dehvari, 2015; Doran, 2014; Ortaçtepe & Akyel, 2015; Tuan, 2021). While Doran (2014) employed qualitative research to examine teachers' perceptions of and prior experiences with PD, the study by Ortaçtepe and Akyel (2015) examined the impact of education program for in-service teachers on their teaching performance in practice. Alibakhshi and Dehvari (2015) explored teachers' perceptions of CPD and figured their principal PD activities in the Iranian educational context. They all made considerable efforts to contribute to enhancing the understanding of PD activities in many different educational contexts all around the world. Similarly, this current study was conducted in the Mekong region where teacher PD activities had been received a lot of attentions from local educators. The findings from the study shed more light on the current opportunities for Vietnamese teachers and their values and provide educational authorities and universities with important information about specific needs of PD activities in demand for high school teachers.

Literature Review

Professional Development

To many scholars, there have been numerous definitions of PD. For instance, Birman et al. (2000) perceive teacher PD as unique and short-term events, which include one-shot workshops, presentations, or graduate courses that teachers follow to update their knowledge during their career. In this sense, PD is restricted to purely activities designed and offered by educational institutions. PD is, therefore, seen as short-term, segmental, authoritarian, and incoherent to teachers' needs and previous or current knowledge.

Guskey (2000) provides another definition that focuses more on teachers' changes and development from a different standpoint. Accordingly, he defines PD programs as a way to reform the professional practices, beliefs, and understanding of school persons toward an articulated end. Defined in this sense, PD is suggested as a process in which learning opportunities are for teachers' professional development, aiming to bring about transmissions in the teachers' knowledge, beliefs, and practices. These differences, in turn, benefit learners in terms of learning achievements as a result of the teachers' improved expertise and abilities. In other words, the effectiveness of PD activities should be evident not only through improving teachers' knowledge and performance but also via the learners' improved learning achievements.

Richards and Farrell (2005) define the conceptualization of teacher PD as the approaches used to develop teachers' quality in order to help them to keep up to date with developments in the field, to review and evaluate their pedagogical abilities, to deal with new teaching tasks according to the changing needs of the institution, to be good mentors for novice teachers, to organize training workshops and other professional events, to present papers or research at seminars or conferences, and to publish articles in trustworthy journals and teaching magazines, to maintain excellent professional standards, to pursue professional development, and to achieve higher levels of learning among their students.

In a nutshell, although diverse definitions of PD activities exist, there seems to be a consensus that PD involves any form of activities that enable teachers to improve their understanding, knowledge, and skills for teaching. Moreover, PD activities can empower them to make changes in their attitudes, morality, and practices to bring about better learning outcomes for their students.

The Effects of PD on Teaching and Learning

The core value of PD activities lies in their impact on teachers' knowledge, skills, and beliefs, which form bases for their classroom innovations believed to result in better students' learning outcomes. As Powell et al. (2003) defined, the impact is an alteration in professional knowledge, practices, and affective response as perceived by the individual practitioner. As such, PD activities should focus on addressing teachers' needs in their careers and, more importantly, how to help teachers improve their teaching knowledge and skills.

While PD is linked to and influences classroom practices, Powell et al. (2003) suggest that measuring the impact of PD does not necessarily have to rely only on quantifiable data. Instead, the effect of PD on teaching performance can also be assessed from the teachers' insights into and on their reflection upon what creates significance and value to their own personal, academic, and PD needs. These reflections and understanding are essential since, in any PD activity, it is expected that teachers employ and apply the knowledge and experience they gain in their classroom practices. However, sufficient evidence from the literature has highlighted that teachers hold pre-existing beliefs or attitudes transferred their professional and classroom courses (Lin, 2013). These pre-existing beliefs or attitudes drive the ways teachers make classroom decisions. One of the factors affecting or founding teachers' pre-existing beliefs or attitudes is the PD experiences (Lin, 2013). That is why numerous studies warned that new knowledge and ideas from recent PD might not find their ways to enter the classroom unless they converge with the teachers' existing beliefs about teaching and learning (Borg, 2008).

It is crucial for PD activities to bring about changes in teachers' knowledge, skills, attitudes, or beliefs. More important is the significant innovations they make in teaching practices in the classrooms and the improvements in their students' learning. It suggests that studies on PD activities for teachers should focus on the changes in teachers' perceptions after participating in PD activities and whether they successfully translate their knowledge gained from PD into their teaching practices through participation in PD.

Forms of PD Activities

PD takes many forms. Guskey (2000) provides a comprehensive list of different methods of TPD, namely training, observation, study group, inquiry/ action research, mentoring, and reflective teaching. Murray (2010) mentions several activities for language teachers' professional development such as reflecting, reading journal articles, keeping a teaching journal, sharing journals, joining local or national or even international teachers' associations, peer mentoring/ coaching, joining teacher support groups, and participating in workshops and conferences either as a presenter or just participant. Wong (2011) suggests fifty PD activities accompanied with references and resources, which she found in the Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) literature. To improve professionally and to interpret teaching differently, Gebhard (2005) provides a set of principles to discuss teaching, including self-observation, other teachers' observation, talking to other teachers as ways to explore teaching, and teaching experimentation which serves as a part of teachers' decision making to see teaching differently.

Related Studies

Undoubtedly, it is important to provide teachers with sufficient PD events. However, administrators and policymakers should evaluate the practical values of these events in their academic staff's PD. Therefore, it is worth-doing research exploring the impact of teachers' attending PD on their teaching performance. Doran (2014) states an increasing need for investigating the professional learning experiences that equip teachers to offer appropriate teaching.

Previous research regarding the significance and efficiency of raising awareness as to the existence of the PD programs (e.g., Da Silva, 2015) suggested that teachers who gained access to the teacher development programs showed a noticeable change in their beliefs about their pedagogical practices. Ortaçtepe and Akyel (2015) investigated the impact of an in-service teacher PD program on the efficacy, self-reported and actual practices of teachers. Using a survey with the participation of fifty Turkish EFL teachers working in eight different schools and observing twenty of them, the researchers found that the professional program improved the participating in-service teachers since they happened to develop their language teaching practices and be more efficacious.

Alibakhshi and Dehvari (2015) examined EFL instructors' fundamental PD practices in the Iranian context as well as how they see ongoing professional development. Twenty English language teachers who participated in this phenomenological research were interviewed. The researchers reported that EFL teachers perceived continuing PD as improving skills, maintaining a constant flow of learning, and upgrading information and abilities. With respect to the methods of conducting PD, the participants underlined that they conducted it by working, receiving formal education, and attending and presenting at conferences as well as workshops.

A volume of education reforms has been undertaken in the Vietnamese context, including the curriculum, teaching methodology, and textbook replacement. Tran et al. (2020) administered qualitative case-study research to figure out principals' and the teachers' perceptions of TPD in response to the education reforms implementation. The participants were recruited in three selected K12 schools. Data were collected from the open-ended interviews with principals, the questionnaires administered to teachers, and the school policy-related documents. Related to the findings of this study, the importance of TPD was highly perceived by the participants.

To a certain extent, these studies have found a foundation for understanding the current situation of PD in Vietnam. Nevertheless, it also revealed that efforts to examine PD activities in a high school context appear to have been somewhat neglected. Given the fact that the Vietnamese government has been making massive attempts to upgrade teaching quality and students' learning outcomes upon their graduation from high school over the past decade, an investigation into how high school teachers in this context have been supported to develop professionally and how these programs impact on their classroom practices and students' learning is worth and has long been overdue. This is the gap that the present study aims to fill. In particular, this study seeks to explore EFL teachers' perceptions of the impact of PD activities on the teachers' practice. Notably, it investigates two main aspects: (1) PD activities the teachers previously engaged in and (2) the impact they perceived these activities had on their practice.

Methodology

Design

The study employed a mixed-method design with quantitative data collected through a questionnaire and qualitative data gathered via in-depth interviews. This collaborative design allows the researchers to investigate the teachers' perceptions of the issues in-depth and in-breadth.

Participants

A total number of 80 EFL teachers working in different high schools in a province in the south of Vietnam responded to the questionnaire. Table 1 presents Information with the participants' genders, age range, teaching experience, and educational qualifications.

Table 1. Participants for questionnaire

Variables		Numbers	Percentage
Gender	Male	27	33.8%
	Female	53	66.2%
Age	22-29 years old	11	13.7%
	30-39 years old	29	36.3%
	40-49 years old	3	3.7%
	50+ years old	37	46.3%
Years of teaching experience	Less than two years	11	13.8%
	From 2 to 5 years	4	5%
	More than 5 years	65	81.2%
Educational qualifications	Bachelor	70	87.5%
	Master	10	12.5%

To gain deeper insights into teachers' perspectives on PD activities, the researcher conducted semi-structured interviews with participants who responded to the questionnaire and showed their willingness to participate in the interviews. Six out of eighty participants agreed to participate in the discussions, among whom three are novices (named A, B, and C) with less than two years of experience and three experienced ones (named D, E, and F).

Procedure

The procedure of the current study followed eight steps as follows:

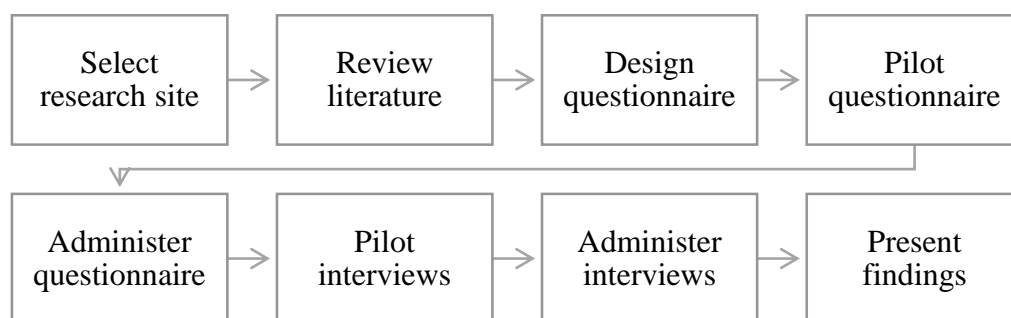


Figure 1. Procedure

First, the research team selected the research site to administer the investigation. Then, the researchers reviewed the previous studies in the field to build up the skeleton for the current research. Based on the literature review, the research team designed a questionnaire. The piloting questionnaires were sent to English teachers who did not participate in the official study to ensure validity and reliability. After that, the research team analyzed the feedback from those partaking in the pilot and revised the questionnaire. Then, the official questionnaires were delivered to the current study participants through the Google Form platform. After two weeks, the participants were informed to stop sending the respondents and start analyzing the data.

Regarding the results from the quantitative data, the researchers designed the interview questions and piloted them with six participants who would not partake in the study. After receiving feedback from them for making some adjustments, six official interviews were conducted to gauge insightful information about EFL teachers' perceptions.

Instruments

To find out answers to the two research questions, the researchers combined two instruments, including (1) a questionnaire aimed to identify the existing PD activities and their impact on participants' teaching and learning, and (2) interviews aimed to gain further information about the teachers' perceptions about the impact of PD activities.

A combined English and Vietnamese questionnaire were designed and conducted as a major research instrument to collect quantitative data. In total, the questionnaire includes thirty-eight items which are divided into three sections. In particular, the first section consists of four items aiming to get demographic information about participants' gender, age, educational qualifications, and years of teaching experience. The second section was devoted to the examination of the teachers' frequency in participating in PD activities. Accordingly, the participants selected their answer in a 5-Point-Likert scale. Ranging from Never, Rarely, Sometimes, Usually, and Always for each of the fourteen PD activities,

EFL teachers were required to respond to the activities, including taking degree programs, conferences, workshops/ seminars, in-house meetings, self-reading materials, discussion with colleagues, teaching in their classes, reflective writing, peer observations, doing collaborative research, doing action research individually, belonging to a TESOL Association, attending training courses, and observing teachers in other institutions. In the third section, twenty items aimed to gain insights into participants' perceptions of the impact of the existing PD activities on their teaching and learning. This section presented the questionnaire in a 5-Point-Likert scale ranging from "Strongly Agree" to "Strongly Disagree".

To gain more insights into the participants' perceptions, semi-structured interviews were conducted with a strong focus on the participants' perceptions of the impact of the existing PD activities. According to Magaldi and Berler (2020), semi-structured interviews allow researchers to gauge insightful information about interviewees' perspectives. The interview questions were open-ended in Vietnamese, the mother tongue of the interviewees, to encourage the participants to freely share and express their ideas. The interview questions mainly focused on exploring teachers' thoughts of the existing PD activities' impact on their teaching performance. Specifically, the questions were on what PD activities the teachers partook in, whether they were effective in their teaching in practice, why they perceived that way, and what caused the resistance to the implementation of teaching innovations in their teaching.

Findings and Discussions

Existing PD Activities

In exploring the teachers' perceptions of PD activities, the study first investigated what opportunities for PD the teacher participants have been able to gain access to in this context. Table 2 displays the results of the Descriptive Statistics test.

Table 2. Participants' existing PD activities (N=80)

Form of PD activities	Min.	Max.	Mean	SD
In-house meetings	4.00	5.00	4.85	.36
Discussion with colleagues	3.00	5.00	4.20	.70
Self-reading materials	2.00	5.00	4.09	.70
Teaching in their own classes	2.00	5.00	3.98	.64
Attending training courses	1.00	5.00	3.53	.76
Peer observation	2.00	5.00	3.30	.97
Reflective writing	1.00	5.00	3.15	.93
Doing action research individually	1.00	5.00	3.11	.97
Workshops/ Seminars	2.00	4.00	3.01	.61
Taking degree programs	1.00	4.00	3.01	.99
Doing collaborative research	1.00	5.00	2.28	.95
Observing teachers in other schools	1.00	4.00	2.24	.84
Conferences	1.00	4.00	1.99	.83
Belonging to a TESOL association	1.00	5.00	1.95	.83
Total	2.57	3.86	3.14	.25

The results showed that the teachers attended PD activities on an occasional rather than frequent basis (M=3.14). In other words, they occasionally joined these activities only, and there appeared to be no systematic scheme for the teachers to get involved in these activities regularly. On the one hand, such an absence of regularity might be interpreted because teachers in this context have heavy teaching loads and thus limited time to plan for attending these

activities, especially when these event times fall into conflict with their teaching schedules. The abovementioned discussion was supported by Teacher B's excerpt as:

"We actually do not have enough time for attending PD activities. We have a lot of things to do, such as teaching, lesson planning, taking care of students' learning, or doing paperwork." (A; Novice teacher; Male)

It somehow showed that EFL teachers there lacked the institutional support for rescheduling the teachers' teaching or reducing their workloads. Teacher A continued,

"I used to ask for the institution's support, but the support was insufficient. Therefore, I decided to accept the fact that it is okay if I do not have enough opportunities to be involved in PD activities." (A; Novice teacher; Male)

On the other hand, administrators and policymakers did not understand how important PD activities are to the teachers' teaching performance, or it was simply affected by the allowed budget. Such a finding seemingly aligns with results reported from a study by Zein (2016) which found out that PD was constrained by a lack of sound understanding of the PD, implementation inconsistencies, lack of budget, and incentives.

With regards to teachers' participation in specific activities, the three most frequently attended activities include in-house meetings (M=4.85), discussion with colleagues (M=4.20), self-reading materials (M=4.09). On the other hand, PD activities that take place outside of the teachers' school contexts appeared to be rarely attended. These include belonging to a TESOL association (M=1.95), conferences (M=1.99), and observing teachers in other schools (M=2.34).

To a certain extent, these figures suggest that the participants relied mainly on activities within their schools and colleagues for PD or self-study. The interviews further explained that the teachers were officially required by their administrators. Such a sense of obligation to attend these in-house activities seems even more substantial to the three novice teachers. Teacher C, for instance, commented:

"I always engaged in some compulsory PD activities at school like in-house meetings every week, observing my colleagues at school or taking compulsory courses. Besides that, I also participated in other PD activities like reading book or materials and practice reflective teaching if I have much free time." (C; Novice teacher; Male)

These findings were partly in line with the study by Roberts (2007), which found that academic staff usually used interactive methods consisting of consulting with colleagues and mentoring. However, while the current study found that the teachers frequently read materials to enhance their professionals, those in the study by Roberts (2007) partook in self-developing activities such as online courses. Different findings in these studies strengthened the inference that Vietnamese teachers highly perceived the values of the PD activities held individually. Consequently, the teachers' learning autonomy also played an important role in their PD. Backtracking to the literature, Sert (2006) assumed that the increase of autonomous learning and the awareness of its value might develop teachers' self-governing capacity as well as contribute to their higher achievements and motivation. However, related to the considerations of these PD activities as a compulsory task for EFL teacher, a huge question mark was put on that whether it is a good sign for further PD activities in Vietnam. Vähäsantanen and Eteläpelto (2009) found that Finnish teachers perceived most of the pedagogical reforms or changes in Finland that lead to the equivalent PD activities as a top-down planning process; thus, what has been absent from these PD activities was sufficient attention to the teachers' perspectives. Consequently, the teachers there tended to resist the reforms, changes, and PD activities.

Learning from the experience in the Finnish context might help other educational contexts all around the world avoid these wrecks in their implementation of educational changes, spectacularly further PD activities.

On the other hand, opportunities for the teachers to network with teachers and experts from elsewhere to update new development in the field, such as attending conferences or joining TESOL Associations, were extremely rare. Roemer (2021) stated that although Tanzania lecturers are incredibly professional, devoted, and wise, only a few teachers have taken part in any organization as official members. Phan et al. (2021) explained that EFL high school teachers usually paid much attention to what they consider as more practical and relevant PD rather than on dealing with theories and academic issues. They perceived that these types of PD were more relevant to teachers at higher education levels and that they had never been trained or required to do research or attend conferences or seminars as presenters.

However, during the interviews, both novice and experienced teachers had a great desire to participate in conferences and do action research. Specifically, both novice and experienced teachers were keen on self-empowered activities such as researching to take the initiative and get involved. For instance, Teacher F, among the most experienced ones, stated that

“I have been teaching for over 20 years. The PD activities that I like most are doing individual research and participating in educational conferences. The reason why I choose these PD activities is that I can actively engage in what I want to learn.” (F; Experienced teacher; Female)

Representing the novice teachers, Teacher C said,

“I like doing research because I want to discover new things that can build knowledge and facilitate my teaching. Moreover, participating in seminars is also interesting.” (C; Novice teacher; Male)

Interestingly, the teachers had great desire to conduct their action research as well as be significantly aware of research impact on their teaching performance. To make finding clearer, the background information of Teachers F and C was analyzed. As a result, they both obtained master degrees in teaching English as a foreign language. As interpreted, after participating in the graduate programs, the teachers’ awareness of the importance of doing research in their teaching might be better than before. Those narrations were in line with sharing by the teachers in the study conducted in Colombia by González (2003). Spectacularly, less formal and structured training chances, including professional conferences and publication work, were perceived as their primary sources for PD in Colombia. According to the interviewees in the current study, they mostly found it interesting and helpful in engaging their students in classroom activities after participating in these PD activities. Teacher A remarked,

“After participating several PD events, I recognize that my teaching skills are much better. As a result, my students seem to be more engaged in the learning activities.” (A; Novice teacher; Male)

Teachers’ beliefs and motivation are the main factors affecting their willingness to develop their professionals. Karabenick and Noda (2004) strengthened this inference, who stated that teachers’ motivation and beliefs drive teachers’ desire to participate in particular PD activities. Therefore, it is important to enhance teachers’ motivation for conducting their research. In fact, Vietnamese government has invested in training on developing teachers’ research skills and productivity. It is expected to increase both quantity and quality of Vietnamese teacher-writers’ publications.

Participants' Perceptions of the Impact of PD Activities

As explained earlier, the second key focus of the present study was drawn towards the teachers' perceptions of the impacts of the existing PD activities they have gained access to exerted on them and their teaching practice. A Descriptive Statistic test was run to check the influential level of the existing PD activities on the participants' teaching and learning.

Table 3. Impact of the existing PD activities (N=80)

Impacts	Min.	Max.	Mean	SD
Reinforce teaching practices and language proficiency	1.00	5.00	3.66	.62
Using appropriate teaching methods, approaches and strategies	1.00	5.00	3.30	.64
Making positive changes in their beliefs about teaching and learning	1.00	5.00	3.24	.54
Managing classroom activities more effectively	1.00	5.00	3.17	.65
Knowing how to use ICT for teaching vividly and effectively	1.00	5.00	3.16	.55
Using more effective teaching and learning strategies	1.00	5.00	3.14	.50
Planning effective lessons to meet students' learning needs.	1.00	5.00	3.12	.58
Positively changing beliefs about testing and assessing students	1.00	5.00	3.11	.72
Learning new applicable techniques/ methods	1.00	5.00	3.09	.66
Providing classroom instructions in English more effectively.	1.00	5.00	3.09	.44
Knowing how to create a supportive learning environment	1.00	5.00	3.09	.57
Designing assignments and tests to assess students more effectively	1.00	5.00	3.06	.68
Adapting materials and resources more effectively for my teaching	1.00	5.00	3.06	.73
Positively changing beliefs and feelings about PD activities	1.00	5.00	3.05	.55
Transferring new knowledge into classroom practices effectively	1.00	5.00	3.05	.53
Giving students meaningful opportunities to communicate in English	1.00	5.00	2.97	.52
Providing more effective feedback to students	1.00	5.00	2.84	.71
Understanding students more	1.00	5.00	2.01	.78
Building good rapport with students	1.00	5.00	1.61	.74
Motivating unmotivated students	1.00	5.00	1.42	.72
Total	2.55	5.00	2.92	.41

The results showed that the existing PD activities just moderately affected EFL teachers' teaching in practice in a positive way ($M=2.92$). The results were different from those reported in the study by Wati (2011), in which Indonesian teachers found PD activities they had participated in highly effective for their teaching. In considerable efforts for explaining reasons why PD is sometimes not effective, Buczynski and Hansen (2010) stated although teachers benefited from PD, they also encountered several barriers preventing them from implementing PD, such as limited resources, time constraints, mandated curriculum pacing, language learning, and classroom management issues. Also, Dang (2018) found that the expenses and time constraints played as principal hindering factors of Vietnamese teachers' participation in PD. Therefore, these factors might strongly affect the impact of PD on the teachers' teaching and learning in the current study.

Among the proposed effects, the existing PD activities mostly helped reinforce teaching practices and language proficiency ($M=3.66$), use appropriate teaching methods, approaches, and strategies effectively ($M=3.30$), make positive changes in their beliefs about teaching and learning ($M=3.24$), and manage classroom activities more effectively ($M=3.17$).

In the interviews, a majority of the teacher participants repeatedly commented on the impact PD activities had in improving their knowledge for teaching more effectively. Teacher B shared,

“When PD activities were held, we actually learnt something new. The students get benefit from these activities sessions because PD activities equipped me to teach better and meet the needs of students.” (B; Novice teacher; Female)

These findings are similar to those in the study by Buczynski and Hansen (2010), which found that PD can help increase teachers’ science content knowledge, better teaching practices, and promote students’ learning outcomes. Also, the findings supported Knapp’s (2003) beliefs of the primary goal of PD: to improve teachers’ performance, which is mainly measured by their students’ learning outcomes. Regarding the exceptionally high level of satisfaction with this impact, the previous PD activities were influential in developing the quality of academic staff in the researched context.

Another significant impact that most participants consistently stressed in the interviews was that these PD activities helped them improve their language proficiency or skills; thus, they improved their teaching performance. Teacher A shared,

“To tell the truth, my language skills improved a lot after taking some training courses. My listening and speaking skills have been greatly improved, so it can help me meet my students' learning needs.” (A; Novice teacher; Male)

It is undeniable that there is a strong interaction between teachers’ proficiency and their teaching performance in practice (Housen et al., 2012). Especially delighted for Vietnamese educators, the indication of an observable improvement in language proficiency fulfilled Dang’s (2018) concerns that Vietnamese teachers were not confident in their English abilities. The finding was different from the study by Wati (2011) which found that Indonesian teachers did not improve their basic English knowledge after participating in PD events there. However, with respect to the mean score ($M=3.66$), the delightfulness should not have lasted for long because a need for further training focusing on developing teachers’ language proficiency is still visible. Besides, they further detailed how these PD activities improved both his teaching confidence. Teachers C and E presented,

“Participating in these training helps me enhance my awareness of the teaching methods that affect my students’ learning achievements; as a result, I feel more confident.” (C; Novice teacher; Male)

“I think it is very important for the teaching career because it enhances my confidence in teaching.” (E; Experienced teacher; Female)

In the study conducted in Indonesia, Wati (2011) also identified the positive effects of training programs on teachers’ confidence as well as their motivation. In the suggestions of how to promote students’ confidence proposed by Dornyei (2003), it is crucial to provide them with a sense of success and reduce their anxiety. On occasion, as PD training, teachers are not different from playing the student roles that give them a leg up to widen and broaden their horizons academically and pedagogically. Hence, Dornyei’s (2003) suggested that the current study's teachers had experienced a sense of success and reduced their anxiety in teaching practices after participating in previous PD activities.

Next, the teachers trusted in the value that the previous PD activities had brought to their application of ICT in English teaching. Teacher B said,

“With PD activities I took part in, I learnt a lot in order not only to improve my knowledge and skills, but also to find and figure out the best ways to fit into modern teaching techniques.” (B; Novice teacher; Female)

According to Samuel and Pulizala (2014), in the era of that everything is flexible, especially in English language teaching and learning due to the vast development of technologies, both language learners and teachers have to adapt and understand technological techniques in the classrooms to maximize the educational outcomes. Thus, the need for professional training on the use of ICT has increased for years. In the current study, both qualitative and quantitative data supported the conclusion that previous training on ICT made significant impacts on EFL classes in Vietnam, especially the teachers’ use of technological supports in their classrooms. Teacher C said,

“It is so interesting to participate in the training on ICT skills because I can apply a lot of useful activities through the use of technology.” (C; Novice teacher; Male)

In addition, the previous PD activities had notable effects on teachers’ classroom management skills in dealing with mixed-level class sizes. Teacher E contented,

“PD activities impacted my teaching practice. I know how to plan an effective lesson for my students because we have different levels of students in the class.” (E; Experienced teacher; Female)

Undeniably, many classroom problems include large classes and classroom management, discipline problems, mixed-level classes, homework, teaching exam classes, and professional development (Prodromou & Clandfield, 2008). In the Vietnamese educational context, Tran and Nguyen (2021) identified some of the abovementioned classroom problems: the mixed-ability students’ English proficiency. Hordiienko and Lomakina (2015) found it extremely difficult for teachers to develop assignments for mixed-level classes to challenge advanced students but not frustrate and demotivate less competent ones. Therefore, it is necessary to organize sufficient training on classroom management in the Vietnamese context. Fortunately, the current study showed that the teachers benefited from the previous PD activities in terms of strategies for developing teachers’ abilities to deal with mixed-ability classes.

In reverse, besides the visual impacts on the teachers’ performance, they did not recognize their improvement in motivating unmotivated students ($M=1.42$), building a good rapport with students ($M=1.61$), and understanding students more ($M=2.01$). Also, in the interview, the teachers did not recognize the improvement in their skills encouraging their students to learn. Specially, Teacher D stated,

“Actually, I participated in a lot of training on enhancing teachers’ classroom management skills. However, I did not find them much practical for my teaching in practice. Specifically, majority of my students do not want to learn English majors in the future. Therefore, they focus on learning natural science subjects...” (D; Experienced teacher; Male)

Ryan and Deci (2000) defined motivation as an essential factor involving someone in doing something. A person who lacks the driving force to act is considered unmotivated (Yenilmez & Çemrek, 2008). As a result, a big concern has arisen because no improvement in the teachers’ learning of motivating students was observed in this study. Although Nguyen (2019) found that Vietnamese students were highly motivated in English learning, whether the Vietnamese educators have been underestimating the values of the training on the motivational strategies for students’ English knowledge in this context. As evidence, Pham (2016) pointed out that

English was not regarded as the primary study focus by most students in his study. The systematic map of factors affecting Vietnamese students' motivation is complicated. The factors include students' gender, school year, English learning spent time, parental abilities in speaking English (Nguyen, 2019), parental encouragement and financial investment, peer and near-peer effects, perceived values of English for their personal and interpersonal commitments (Pham, 2016), and so on. To deal with diverse factors like that, training on this issue in the Vietnamese context should be more considered.

Besides, the teachers stated that the strategies they had learnt in the previous training were not remarkably helpful for their teaching in practice. As a result, the relationship between the teachers and their students was somehow not as good as expected. Teacher F said,

"I found it difficult to establish a connection with my current study. As you know, we have a remarkable gap between the two generations. Accordingly, it is challenging to have the same perspectives. Sometimes, different perspectives cause problems..." (F; Experienced teacher; Female)

Lee (2012) remarked on the importance of the supportive teacher-student relationship in students learning outcomes. As explained by Hughes et al. (2008) and O'Connor and McCartney (2007), students could behaviorally and emotionally engage in-class activities if the relationship between them and their teachers was good; as a result, they would achieve higher learning outcomes. Therefore, training on improving teachers' abilities to build a strong relationship with their students is essential. However, in the current study, the teachers said they could not improve this ability after attending the previous PD activities. Teacher D said,

"Sometimes, I can feel a huge distance between my students and I, their teachers. I am strongly aware of the importance of teacher-student rapport. That is why I participated in many PD activities that train on improving teachers' abilities to build a good relationship between ourselves and our students. Nonetheless, the impact is not satisfactory." (D; Experienced teacher; Male)

As Hoang and Vu (2016) discussed, both Vietnamese teachers and students had been aware of the importance and benefits of social and emotional learning in school. In this type of learning, the participants can share thoughts and express feelings and sympathy with others. However, said is easier than done because many difficulties prevent this learning from being effective in real life (Hoang & Vu, 2016). These difficulties are students' unwillingness to share thoughts, student-teacher conflict, educational teasing, teachers' and students' negative traits, lack of understanding, time constraints, and even lack of cooperation and support from students' families. Teacher D explained,

"At the ages of a teenager, my students have complicated psychological issues. It is very difficult for me to understand what they want if they do not want to share their thoughts with me." (D; Experienced teacher; Male)

In the interviews, the participants also directly listed some reasons why they resisted the previous PD activities. First, the experienced teachers found it difficult to absorb new teaching methods. Teachers D and F recounted,

"I feel pressured to participate in PD activities because when you are getting older, it is difficult to absorb new teaching methods." (D; Experienced teacher; Male)

"You know what, I am a bit old now. Therefore, participating in PD is sometimes challenging to me. The movement from my house to the events is often over long distances. I feel a bit tired." (F; Experienced teacher; Female)

The interaction of age-related factors and the responses to change of working forces has been well-explored in the previous studies (Shore et al., 2003; Brooke & Taylor, 2005; Posthuma & Campion, 2009). Specifically, Posthuma and Campion (2009) stated that older employees

rarely engaged in taking risks; Shore et al. (2003) found that older workers performed worse than their young colleagues, or Brooke and Taylor (2005) found it difficult for the old workers to learn something new. In educational contexts, teachers' motivation is also affected by their demographic information in general and their age in particular (Powney et al., 2003). Specifically, instead of participating in PD events to gain more knowledge, they are likely to spend more time with their families and friends.

Second, the interviewees found no noticeable increase in their students' learning outcomes after applying the educational innovations. Teacher F said,

"It is a waste of time and effort to take PD courses that have not had any effect on students. I have been looking forward to students' progress after applying what I have learned in the PD programs, but no change has been seen in the learners' outcomes." (F; Experienced teacher; Female)

It is unavoidable to state a solid and direct relationship between professional development for educators and their students' learning improvement. As a result, students' learning outcomes strongly affect teachers' participation in PD or implementing educational innovations in their practices. Thao and Mai (2022) made their efforts to investigate the influence level of both internal and external factors affecting teachers' responses to ELT pedagogical reforms in a teaching context of Vietnam. They found that students' learning outcomes prominently affected teachers' reactions to the reforms. Therefore, the resistance to applying new teaching approaches given in the previous PD activities in the current study was clearly explained throughout their fewer impacts on students' learning progress.

Finally, the proposed teaching methods and techniques in the previous PD activities lacked the applicable values in practice because of students' insufficient learning proficiency. Teacher C and E said,

"I think they do not fully meet teachers' professional needs in practice. Specifically, students' competencies are not good enough to follow the techniques I gained in the previous PD activities." (C; Novice teacher; Male)

"To be honest, the low level of students makes it difficult for me to apply the methods learned from PD activities." (E; Experienced teacher; Female)

English proficiency of Vietnamese people is still a dilemma in this educational context. It is meritorious to observe the considerable efforts of the Vietnamese MoET in improving English language teaching in this country (Phuong, 2017). However, the results of the Vietnam National Foreign Language Project (VNFLP) as a key initiative in the abovementioned efforts were not satisfactory. Shared the same surprise with Phuong (2017), most trainings in Vietnam seemed to pay insufficient attention to EFL students' starting English proficiency. As a result, the teachers in the current study found it challenging to employ those kinds of knowledge that they had gained in the previous PD activities in their practices due to their students' English level. According to Bantwini and King-McKenzie (2011), changes are resisted when teachers fail to administer them in their classrooms. Besides the student-related factors, it is speaking well to say back that teachers need to take much responsibility for the unsuccessful implementation of what they have learned from PD activities. As mentioned, teachers' proficiency always plays an essential role in providing accurate meaningful explanations and responding to learners' errors (Tsui, 2003). Eventually, teachers' learning autonomy should be explored clearer, especially in the Vietnamese context.

In a nutshell, a combination of the quantitative and qualitative evidence revealed that the majority of the teacher participants have been positively impacted by engaging in PD

activities. The most significant areas for improvement, as they perceived, included their pedagogical knowledge and language proficiency. To be specific, these teachers highly perceived the positive impact of these PD activities had on them as a chance to reinforce their teaching practices and language skills, to plan effective lessons to meet students' learning needs, and to design assignments and tests to assess their students more effectively. However, it should be pointed out that the positive impacts these activities exerted on the teachers' practices were not consistently reported among the teachers. In contrast, several teachers appeared to perceive that these activities have had very little value in helping them perform better in teaching and bringing about better outcomes for their learners.

Implications

Findings from the study offer several important implications to the educational managers or government education bodies, including MOET and DOET, school managers, teacher trainers, and the EFL teachers themselves. First, institution managers must provide adequate time for teachers and motivate them to participate in other types of PD activities. It also signals that it is crucial to plan and schedule these activities appropriately and logically into their teaching schedules to increase the teachers' participation rate in these activities. This can be further supported by the fact that the activities are compulsory yet endorsed fully by the school management board to make it officially part of their workload at school. Second, training sessions should be provided where teachers can learn and engage in hands-on experience in classroom-based research. Doing could offer an amicable solution to encourage these teachers to attend more professional programs actively. Third, it is recommended that institution managers should provide teachers with practical PD activities as before. For the PD activities that received less participation and were not applicable, such as attending conferences or belonging to the TESOL association, institution managers should introduce some meetings or TESOL association to help them familiarize themselves with these PD activities. Furthermore, institution managers should consider organizing more PD activities for EFL teachers to participate in. However, institution managers should allow for some participant choice in determining PD offerings. This study indicates that when teachers may choose from a variety of topics and tailor their professional development (PD) experiences to their expertise, prior knowledge, and student populations, they discover greater potential for engagement. Therefore, teacher trainers should investigate teachers' priority, prior knowledge, school curriculum, and student's needs carefully before organizing a PD program. Besides that, one crucial finding from the interview is that novice and experienced teachers appeared to have different requirements for PD. In this sense, when designing or planning for upcoming PD activities, institution managers must understand the specific needs of each group and tailor the activities accordingly. Finally, addressing teachers' urgent needs and expectations might be an excellent way to motivate the teachers to get involved and highlight the relevance of the PD activities to their teaching problems and challenges.

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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