



Exploring EFL Teachers' Perceptions and Activities for Pedagogical Professional Development in the Mekong Delta, Vietnam

Dang Vu Hoai Nhan

Nam Can Tho University, Vietnam

Introduction

Many countries around the world stress the importance of implementing educational activities to innovate their national education system for the better (Ekşi, 2010). In Vietnam, these innovations result in new requirements for English language teachers in terms of the English Teacher Competency Framework (ETCF) which identifies what makes effective teaching (Vu & O'Rourke, 2013). For this reason, it is essential for EFL in-service teachers to be aware of and keep up with the updated requirements of teachers' competencies. Therefore, ongoing professional development is considered to be necessary and important for improving the quality of language teaching and education in teachers' lives (Wong, 2011).

In light of previous research, there are some reasons why teachers' personal growth and development is vital and appreciable in education. First, having a high quality of education requires teachers' self-improvement for their teaching profession. Hargreaves and Fullan (1992) emphasized the importance of an increase in educational standards, which correlates primarily to better educational opportunities for students in schools. In other words, better educational opportunities for students require a better quality of teaching. The teachers, thus, are in need of developing and equipping themselves with not only content knowledge but also pedagogical knowledge, so that they can provide improved opportunities of learning for students. Second, the teaching career requires language teachers to engage in continuous professional development because teachers' expertise in teaching grows over the span of their teaching career (Tom, 1997). Therefore, one of the teachers' responsibilities includes their own continuous professional development by adopting strategies and making use of the opportunities they have for professional development. Finally, teachers' life-long learning can be an inspiring model for the students to emulate towards their own continuous learning. Day (1999) stated that teachers' primary duty is to instill life-long learning into their students through their persistent application of continuous learning.

In Vietnam, although some studies have been conducted to evaluate the effectiveness of the teachers' professional development (Truong, 2017), there has been a paucity of research looking at what the teachers do to develop their knowledge, especially pedagogical knowledge. This study, therefore, focuses on teachers' pedagogical development, primarily aiming to shed light on EFL teachers' perceptions and activities for developing their pedagogy in the Vietnamese context.

Literature Review

When it comes to teachers' pedagogical development, to the best of the researcher's knowledge, very little relevant research can be documented. Instead, this study was informed by a number of studies that intended to describe the characteristics of pedagogical development in terms of professional development. In a study by Moradkhani et al. (2013), one of the eight categories of teacher educators' pedagogical knowledge is the knowledge of professional development, which has to do with the teachers' ability to be engaged in professional development activities. Moreover, teachers' engagement with professional development activities is influenced by their pedagogical beliefs (Burridge & Carpenter, 2013). Additionally, teachers can keep up with knowledge and pedagogy in their subject areas and in the field of education through continuous professional development (Sinyangwe, Billingsley & Dimitriadi, 2016). Therefore, there is a need to explore teachers' perceptions and activities for pedagogical professional development.

Several studies available in the literature have investigated English teachers' perceptions on professional development activities in the field of ELT (e.g., Alibakhshi & Dehvari, 2015; Alshumaimeri & Almohaisen, 2017; Doran, 2014; Şener & Çokçalışkan, 2017; Sywelem & Witte, 2013; Tawalbeh, 2015). These studies present an overview of the teachers' perceptions of professional development activities in different contexts. No clear consensus exists in the results of these studies because different studies show different results. For instance, Saudi teachers in Sywelem and Witte's (2013), Tawalbeh's (2015), and Alshumaimeri and Almohaisen's (2017) studies found that the teachers perceived the professional development activities negatively owing to some contextual reasons, whereas the teachers in the other studies showed the opposite by recognizing the importance and necessity of professional development activities. Noticeably, these studies were limited by a small sample size as demonstrated by the fact that they were implemented with only nine and ten participants for qualitative data, (i.e., Şener & Çokçalışkan, 2017; Doran, 2014). This leads to the findings being less valid.

With respect to teachers' perceptions, Borg (2003) claimed that teachers' perceptions are the things that the teachers believe in, think of, and know about. In the current study, the researcher limits teachers' perceptions being analyzed into three categories, namely teachers' understanding, awareness, and evaluation of the importance and necessity of pedagogical professional development. That is, the researcher investigates teachers' understanding about how teachers understand the characteristics of their own process of pedagogical development, by what means they develop their pedagogical knowledge and the reasons why they develop their pedagogical knowledge. Additionally, the awareness of pedagogical development was examined. Finally, EFL teachers also evaluate the importance and necessity of pedagogical development in their context.

Concerning EFL teachers' activities for pedagogical professional development, three studies were reviewed. These studies were carried out by Topkaya and Çelik (2016), Karaaslan (2003), and Ekşi (2010). The three studies reached unanimous consensus that engaging in collaborative activities with colleagues, participating in courses, workshops, or conferences, and doing reflections on teaching were the three strategies favored by the teachers. On the other hand, peer observation was not the activity that most teachers chose to practice for professional development. Moreover, the researcher observed teacher education in the Vietnamese context which has drawn attention to the importance of feedback to EFL teachers. In light of these theoretical and contextual issues, through this study, the researcher proposed five strategies that EFL teachers in the Mekong Delta of Vietnam may practice to develop their pedagogy including (1) Receiving feedback and suggestions (2) Observing classrooms, (3) Discussing with colleagues, (4) Reflecting on one's practice, and (5) Participating in workshops and conferences.

Methods

Central to the current study was to investigate EFL teachers' perceptions and activities for pedagogical professional development in the Mekong Delta, Vietnam. Therefore, the study was designed as a descriptive one that used both quantitative and qualitative approaches to collect data from 110 EFL teachers, but only a total of 104 teachers were reached. A convenience sampling technique enabled the researcher to approach the eligible participants for the study. Twenty-eight of the participants were males, and 76 of them were female. These participants were all EFL teachers.

These participants were invited to respond to the questionnaires to find out their perceptions and activities for pedagogical professional development. Among the participants, ten of them were randomly asked to participate in semi-structured interviews to support the results of the questionnaires. These interviews lasted between 15 to 25 minutes and were conducted in either English or their first language. The data from the questionnaire were then analysed quantitatively with SPSS (version 18.0). Then the qualitative data from the interviews was transcribed and analyzed qualitatively to triangulate the quantitative data.

Results

Teachers' Perceptions of Pedagogical Professional Development

EFL teachers' awareness of pedagogical professional development

Descriptive statistical tests were run to calculate the overall mean score of the EFL teachers' awareness of pedagogical professional development. The mean score was 3.79 (SD = .47) out of 5. The interviews were used to examine teachers' awareness of pedagogical professional development from different perspectives. From the interviews, nine out of ten participants said they were aware of developing pedagogical knowledge, shown in one of the interviewees' responses:

Yes, I am aware of this process because when I read books or journal articles, I realize that the authors wrote some teaching activities. Therefore, I think I can learn from these activities. Moreover, when I attend some workshops or conferences, I can learn some new teaching techniques. (Teacher 6)

The response from one participant expressed opposing ideas. This participant stated unawareness of developing pedagogical knowledge due to the participants' contextual teaching requirements. The participant claimed:

Actually, I am not because in my teaching context, I don't have to make lesson plans. I usually teach English according to my teaching habits. (Teacher 10)

EFL teachers' evaluation of the importance and necessity of pedagogical professional development

A descriptive statistical test was run to calculate the overall mean score of EFL teachers' evaluation of the importance and necessity of pedagogical professional development. The overall mean score of the participants' evaluation is a little higher than the 4 in the five-point scale (M= 4.09, SD= .49). To have a deeper understanding of the teachers' evaluation, the researcher used the qualitative data from the interviews to investigate the teachers' evaluation from different aspects. All participants reached a

consensus on the evaluation of importance and necessity of developing pedagogical knowledge. The following example reflected this consensus in more detail:

Developing pedagogical knowledge is very important and necessary which I focus on everyday because if I have little or no understanding of my pedagogical knowledge, my teaching quality will be poor... (Teacher 1)

Additionally, although two participants agreed that developing pedagogical knowledge is important and necessary, they also emphasized the importance and necessity of other teaching aspects such as language competence, classroom management, and the like. One said:

Developing pedagogical knowledge is very important and necessary in parallel with developing linguistic competence. This is because I am an English teacher, so these two features are equally important. (Teacher 2)

EFL teachers' understanding of developing pedagogical knowledge

By analyzing thematically the interviewees' responses, the researcher found three themes of teachers' understanding. First, in terms of how the participants understand the characteristics of their own process of developing pedagogical knowledge, the majority of the interviewees believed that pedagogical professional development is a long, on-going, challenging, and difficult process. For instance, one participant stated:

The process of developing pedagogical knowledge is a long and difficult process... (Teacher 1)

With respect to the effect of professional development activities on pedagogical professional development, more than half of the participants realized that they could develop pedagogical knowledge via professional development activities (e.g., attending workshops, reading books, and observing classrooms), as can be seen in the following example:

...It is not simple, but we can learn or attend workshops and training programs on teaching young learners to acquire new knowledge... (Teacher 10)

Finally, regarding the reasons for developing pedagogical knowledge, half of the interviewees proposed three reasons why they wish to develop pedagogical knowledge, namely (1) to teach English more effectively, (2) to practice different teaching methods, and (3) to acquire new knowledge. The three following examples reflected these reasons:

...developing pedagogical knowledge is to improve our knowledge of teaching to teach more effectively. (Teacher 3)

...when our pedagogical knowledge enhances, we can practice different approaches or methods. (Teacher 4)

We can learn or attend pedagogical workshops and training programs to develop pedagogical knowledge. From these activities, we can acquire new knowledge. (Teacher 10)

Teachers' Activities for Pedagogical Professional Development

Results from the questionnaires suggested that among the participants, the three most common activities that EFL teachers practiced to develop their pedagogy were "Receiving feedback and

suggestions” (86%), “Observing classrooms” (75.6%) and “Participating in workshops and conferences” (75.4%). The results are depicted in Table 1.

TABLE 1
EFL Teachers’ Activities for Pedagogical Professional Development

Activity	Percent
Receiving feedback and suggestions	86%
Observing classrooms	75.6%
Discussing with colleagues	37.8%
Reflecting on one’s practice	67.4%
Participating in workshops and conferences	75.4%

In order to further understand the reason why these activities were employed by the participants to develop their pedagogy, the researcher collected and thematically analyzed qualitative data from the interviews. First, concerning “Receiving feedback and suggestions,” two out of ten interviewees reported their use of this activity owing to recognizing teaching weaknesses, as shown in the following example:

... I always appreciate feedback or suggestions from my superiors or my colleagues because they can realize what I can’t realize in my teaching. (Teacher 9)

Second, regarding “Observing classrooms,” one interviewee explained that the interviewee frequently used this activity to develop pedagogical knowledge because the interviewee wanted to receive feedback and gain teaching experiences from experienced teachers. The interviewee said:

...I usually ask for permission to observe other teachers’ classes whom I believe as experienced teachers. Moreover, I also ask my colleagues to observe my classes and give me feedback and teaching experiences... (Teacher 4)

Third, “Discussing with colleagues” was mentioned by three out of ten interviewees. They used this strategy because they could share their knowledge and apply the knowledge for their own teaching context, as illustrated below:

...I often discuss with my colleagues about pedagogical knowledge. For example, we will discuss how we teach a lesson, then my colleagues or the group leader will share their experiences, so I can learn from them a lot... (Teacher 5)

However, three interviewees refused to use “Discussing with colleagues” in their teaching context because they believed that some colleagues were unwilling to share their knowledge, so discussions were unnecessary, as shown here:

...when I discuss my problems with my colleagues, sometimes I can have useful responses, sometimes not... (Teacher 2)

Fourth, with respect to “Reflecting on one’s practice,” seven out of ten interviewees agreed that they used this activity to develop pedagogical knowledge because they desired to improve their teaching practice and develop their knowledge. One stated:

... I usually think of what I taught in the class to improve my teaching quality... (Teacher 10)

Last, the reasons why seven out of ten participants in the present study employed “Participating in workshops and conferences” was acquiring new knowledge of pedagogy and increasing their teaching quality, as shown in the following example:

...I usually go to some pedagogical workshops to learn more about new teaching methods for better teaching... (Teacher 9)

After analyzing the five activities mentioned above, the researcher found that three more activities were also employed to develop pedagogical knowledge by the interviewees. Notably first, “Reading books and journals” was reported by six out of ten participants in an attempt to develop their pedagogical knowledge for reasons of improving teaching quality, developing pedagogical knowledge, and searching for useful information. The following example illustrated the opinion:

...I will look for educational journals to read, or search for other information to teach more effectively... (Teacher 1)

Next, caught less attention from the interviewees, “Attending training programs” was stated by one interviewee who wished to gain knowledge and experience through this activity, as shown in the following example:

Regularly, I participate in training programs to gain knowledge and experiences... (Teacher 3)

Last but not least, “Conducting action research” was also an activity that one interviewee employed to develop pedagogical knowledge. The interviewee explained that “Conducting action research” served for the purpose of improving teaching quality. For example,

...Lastly, I think that the teacher can collect data from his or her classes, so he or she can research which is needed to improve his/her teaching quality. (Teacher 5)

Discussion

EFL Teachers’ Perceptions of Pedagogical Professional Development

EFL teachers’ awareness and their evaluation of pedagogical professional development

The results from both the questionnaires and interviews showed that most of the participants were aware of pedagogical professional development and recognized the importance and necessity of pedagogical professional development in their own teaching context. These findings are consistent with those of Doran (2014), Alibakhshi and Dehvari (2015), and Şener and Çokçalışkan (2017) in light of professional development. However, these findings are different from those in Saudi Arabia of Sywelem and Witte (2013), Tawalbeh (2015), and Alshumaimeri and Almohaisen (2017) research, which revealed that EFL teachers perceived professional development activities negatively. One possible explanation could be that the needs of EFL teachers in Saudi Arabia were not taken into account in designing professional development activities (Tawalbeh, 2015). This results in EFL teachers being less interested in professional development activities. On the other hand, as observed from the Vietnamese context, it is believed that teachers should always be better than students. That belief drives Vietnamese teachers to engage themselves actively in many kinds of professional development. Thus, Vietnamese teachers

stressed the importance and necessity of developing pedagogical knowledge as well as being aware of its place in their teaching context.

EFL teachers' understanding of developing pedagogical knowledge

The results from the qualitative data collected by means of the interviews showed that the participants considered pedagogical professional development as a long, on-going, difficult, and challenging process which they involved themselves in to update their knowledge, use new teaching methods, and improve their teaching quality. Compared to the definitions of professional development of Wong (2011) "a lifelong endeavor, a way of being, and a perspective on how one practices as well the practices itself" (p.142) and Alemu (2013) "the engagement of individuals in any activity for the enhancement of their capacity at the workplace and to gain, improve, and share a body of knowledge and skills that are relevant to perform particular duties in their workplace" (p.306), it is apparent that the participants' understanding of pedagogical professional development and the definitions of Wong (2011) and Alemu (2013) are somewhat identical in terms of the characteristics of the process, the effect of professional development activities, and the reasons for professional development. Therefore, it can be concluded that Vietnamese EFL teachers see the process of pedagogical professional development from the perspective of professional development.

EFL teachers' activities for pedagogical professional development

A detailed look at the results of the questionnaires and interviews revealed that EFL teachers in the study practiced the four activities, including "Receiving feedback and suggestions," "Observing classrooms," "Reflecting on one's practice," and "Participating workshops and conferences" to develop their pedagogy. This finding is not very surprising since it has been examined by numerous previous studies (e.g., Ekşi, 2010; Karaaslan, 2003; Topkaya & Çelik, 2016). It is worth noting that in Karaaslan's (2003) research, the researcher found that observing classrooms was not perceived as critical to the teachers' development because classroom observation might be seen as a kind of evaluation rather than development assistance, so it caused negative feelings from the teachers being observed. In the present study, however, Vietnamese teachers appreciated the usefulness of observing classrooms in developing pedagogical knowledge. There may be a couple of reasons for this reaction towards classroom observation. One reason can be that the teachers' desire for pedagogical development was stronger than the feeling of being evaluated. Another reason for the popularity of classroom observation among EFL teachers may be that the teachers being observed believed the observers were competent enough to reflect upon their lessons being observed. Therefore, it is highly important to stress that observers be experienced and professional (Cosh, 1999).

Furthermore, the results from the questionnaires and interviews disclosed that the teachers were still less attracted by using "Discussing with colleagues" to develop pedagogical knowledge. This could be explained by the interviewees' responses that some of their colleagues were not pleased to help or share their knowledge, so "Discussing with colleagues" was not helpful in pedagogical development. On the other hand, according to the questionnaire and interview results, "Reflecting on one's practice" was used by two thirds of the participants. This implies that teachers put more effort into their teaching by thinking of the events that happen in their classes carefully and deeply. Inferred from the results of the two activities, "Discussing with colleagues" and "Reflecting on one's practice", the teachers in the present study preferred working independently to discussing matters with other teachers in their context.

Moreover, according to the results of the interviews, the participants also proposed three activities that they practiced to develop pedagogy, namely "Reading books and journals," "Attending training programs," and "Conducting action research." In fact, all of these strategies are well reflected in Villegas-Reimer's (2003) models of professional development; however, the first two activities were frequently employed to develop teachers' professionally, as investigated in Topkaya and Çelik's (2016), Karaaslan's

(2003), and Ekşi's (2010) research. Therefore, it is interesting to note that one participant reported conducting action research to develop pedagogy. It is reasonable to infer that Vietnamese teachers recently have paid more attention to conducting research and examining their own teaching context, but the fact remains that only a minority of teachers initiate classroom investigation. The most likely explanation is that teachers may have inadequate knowledge or experience in action research, so conducting action research in their context can be considered a high-risk professional development activity. Furthermore, teachers may face a serious shortage of incentive, time, and available resources to undertake research in their teaching context.

Conclusion

The current research was conducted with the aim of investigating EFL teachers' perceptions and activities for pedagogical professional development. Drawing on the results of this study, the teachers' perceptions of developing pedagogical knowledge were positive. Specifically, the teachers perceived their process of developing pedagogical knowledge as a professional development activity, recognized the importance and necessity of developing pedagogical knowledge, and were aware of this process in their context. Moreover, the teachers practiced the four activities, namely "Receiving feedback and suggestions," "Observing classrooms," "Reflecting on one's practice," and "Participating in workshops on pedagogical knowledge," together with three additional strategies (i.e., "Reading books and journals," "Attending training programs," and "Conducting action research"), to develop their pedagogy.

The Author

Đặng Vũ Hoài Nhân obtained his M.A. in teaching English from Can Tho University. Presently, he is a lecturer of English at Nam Can Tho University. His research interests include language testing and assessment, language teaching, and professional development.

Center for Graduation Standards and Human Resource Development
Nam Can Tho University
168 Nguyen Van Cu (noi dai) Rd
An Binh, Ninh Kieu, Can Tho 94118
Vietnam
Tel: +84 939 716 089
Email: dvhnhan@nctu.edu.vn or dvhnhan@gmail.com

References

- Alemu, A. (2013). Professionalism and professional development of teachers in English language teaching: University of Gondar in focus. *International Journal of Innovative Research and Development*, 2(9), 305-313.
- Alibakhshi, G., & Dehvari, N. (2015). EFL teachers' perceptions of continuing professional development: A case of Iranian high school teachers. *Profile Issues in Teachers Professional Development*, 17(2), 29-42.
- Alshumaimeri, Y. A., & Almohaisen, F. M. (2017). Saudi EFL teachers' perceptions of professional development activities. *Journal of Education and Social Policy*, 7(1), 185-193.
- Borg, S. (2003). Teacher cognition in language teaching: A review of research on what language teachers think, know, believe, and do. *Language teaching*, 36(2), 81-109.

- Burridge, P., & Carpenter, C. (2013). Expanding pedagogical horizons: A case study of teacher professional development. *Australian Journal of Teacher Education*, 38(9), 10-24.
- Cosh, J. (1999). Peer observation: Reflective model. *ELT Journal*, 53(1), 22-27.
- Day, C. (1999). *Developing teachers: The challenges of lifelong learning*. London: Falmer Press.
- Doran, P. R. (2014). Professional development for teachers of culturally and linguistically diverse learners: Teachers' experiences and perceptions. *Global Education Journal*, 2014(3), 62-80.
- Ekşi, G. (2010). *An assessment of the professional development needs of English language instructors working at a state university* (Unpublished master's thesis). The Graduate School of Social Sciences, Middle East Technical University, Ankara.
- Hargreaves, A., & Fullan, M. G. (1992). *Understanding teacher development*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press.
- Karaaslan, A. D. (2003). *Teacher's perceptions of self-initiated professional development: A case study on Başkent University English language teachers* (Doctoral dissertation). METU.
- Moradkhani, S., Akbari, R., Ghafar Samar, R., & Kiany, G. R. (2013). English language teacher educators' pedagogical knowledge base: The macro and micro categories. *Australian Journal of Teacher Education*, 38(10), 123-141.
- Şener, S., & Çokçalışkan, A. (2017). English language teachers' perceptions on professional development: A case study of in-service teachers in Muğla. *ELT Research Journal*, 6(2), 205-217.
- Sinyangwe, M. K., Billingsley, B., & Dimitriadi, Y. (2016). Factors affecting teachers' participation in continuing professional development (CPD): The perspectives of secondary school mathematics teachers in Zambia. Retrieved online from https://www.researchgate.net/publication/323825595_Participation_of_Teachers_in_Continuing_Professional_Development/link/5aac929b458515e91/download
- Sywelem, M., & Witte, J. (2013). Continuing professional development: Perceptions of elementary school teachers in Saudi Arabia. *Journal of Modern Education Review*, 3(12), 881-898.
- Tawalbeh, T. E. I. (2015). Instructors' perceived effectiveness of current professional development programs at Taif University English Language Center. *English Language Teaching*, 8(11), 117-130.
- Tom, A. R. (1997). *Redesigning teacher education*. New York: State University of New York Press.
- Topkaya, E. Z., & Çelik, H. (2016). Non-native English Language Teachers perceptions of professional development: Implications for career stages. *Procedia-Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 232, 5-11.
- Truong, V., (2017). In search of effective professional development of EFL teachers in Vietnam. *VNU Journal of Foreign Studies*, 33(3), 157-166.
- Villegas-Reimers, E. (2003). *Teachers professional development: An international review of the literature*, Paris: International Institute for Educational Planning, UNESCO.
- Vu, M. T., & O'Rourke, J. (2013). Vietnam English teacher competency framework: Implementation considerations. In British Council (Ed.), *Teacher competency frameworks: Developing excellence in teaching* conference (pp. 26-27). February 2013, Kuala Lumpur.
- Wong, M. S. (2011). Fifty ways to develop professionally: What language educators need to succeed. *Language Education in Asia*, 2(1), 142-155.