



Factors Affecting Professional Pedagogical Development in the Mekong Delta Area, Vietnam: EFL Teachers' Voices

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Introduction

Living in the era of globalization, where knowledge, teaching philosophies, and technologies are changing and developing rapidly, teacher education has become a necessary and important task of many countries all around the world to keep pace with the global flow of educational reforms. From an overall perspective, there have been continuous changes to the national education system in Vietnam due to the implementation of the National Foreign Language project to enhance the quality of language teaching and learning. Therefore, English Language Teaching in Vietnam is highly demanding in professional knowledge owing to some valid grounds.

To begin with, being aware of changes in the field of ELT is important for English language teachers because of its rapid innovations (Karaaslan, 2003). Therefore, English language teachers are expected to continue to enhance their knowledge and skills to keep up with these innovations in the field. To develop ELT knowledge and participate in professional development (PD) programs, teachers' self-development is considered an effective contribution towards their PD. Furthermore, several factors, including a large amount of knowledge of the factors that govern and influence the process of teaching and learning in the classroom, have contributed to the effectiveness of classroom management in ELT contexts (Karaaslan, 2003). Therefore, English language teachers need to be familiar with many teaching concepts, guidelines, and methods to motivate the students and get them involved in the classroom activities. English teachers, hence, need to develop pedagogical knowledge to manage a foreign language classroom effectively. Lastly, to deal with the problem of increasing numbers of learners, English language teachers need to be equipped skilfully with effective teaching methodologies (Coşkuner, 2001). For this reason, the need to develop a professional knowledge of EFL teachers necessitates that teachers engage in professional development activities.

In Vietnam, although some studies have been conducted to explore English teachers' professional development (i.e., Dang, 2020; Nguyen, 2019), there has been a paucity of research looking at factors affecting teachers' professional pedagogical development. By extension, this study focused on factors, including both positive and negative factors, affecting teachers' professional pedagogical development in the Vietnamese context.



Literature Review

Karaaslan (2003) conducted the study to investigate factors hindering change and growth in teachers' professional development. The study concluded that heavy workload, self-motivation, and institutional support were the three most important impediments to the participants' professional development. These three factors were followed by financial issues, lack of collaboration and communication among colleagues, educational background, inflexible working hours, and difficulty in accessing the literature in the field. Investigation into reasons why these factors were perceived to be important was not planned in the study.

In addition, Ekşi (2010) researched factors hindering the instructors from attending professional development events. Ekşi found that date/time issues, inessential content, and disadvantageous location are the top three factors hindering the instructors from participating in professional development activities, followed by cost, trainer issues, and intense pacing. Factors that attracted less attention from the participants were excessive workload, lack of institutional support, lack of information on upcoming programs, depleted self-motivation. The findings pose a very different picture as opposed to those of the above studies.

İnceçay and Bakioglu (2010) also undertook research investigating factors affecting teachers' professional learning. Self-devised questionnaires were employed to gather data from 482 state primary school teachers. The results indicated that quality of professional development programs, financial deficiencies, institutional support were recognized as the three most important factors to affect teachers' professional learning. Moreover, the teachers were particularly affected by school administrations and school culture. The teachers in the study thought that extrinsic motivation for professional development was not as important as intrinsic motivation because the teachers need their own development plans to follow instead of others' plans.

Sinyangwe et al. (2016) studied factors affecting teachers' participation in continuing professional development in the context of Zambia. The study used a case study research approach to collect data from 83 secondary school teachers using questionnaires and interviews. The researchers learned that teachers' excessive workload, teachers' unawareness of professional development opportunities, and teachers' lack of encouragement for participation were the three major factors affecting teachers' participation in professional development activities, followed by teachers' attitude about professional development, teachers' own circumstances, and teachers' school assignments. No suitable continuing professional development programs, financial issues, time, and appraisal were reported to be lesser issues affecting teachers' participation in professional development activities.

In general, the studies mentioned here present an overview of factors hindering EFL teachers from developing pedagogical knowledge. These factors varied according to teachers' teaching contexts. Noticeably, it remains to be seen that most studies emphasized the factors affecting the teachers' process of developing pedagogical knowledge negatively. Therefore, the present study was conducted to investigate not only negative factors but also positive factors that assist EFL teachers in professional development. In other words, this is a gap that needs to be filled in the literature.

Method

Central to the study was to identify possible factors affecting teachers' PD in the Mekong Delta area, Vietnam. Therefore, the study was designed as a descriptive one that employed a qualitative approach to collect data from ten participants. A purposive sampling technique was employed to approach eligible participants. The participants were all English teachers from primary schools, secondary schools, high schools, universities, and centers of English language. The participants came from different workplaces in four provinces and one city in the Mekong Delta area, Vietnam. These participants were invited to participate in semi-structured interviews lasting between 15 to 25 minutes which were conducted in either English or their first language. The qualitative data from the interviews were transcribed, translated, and analyzed qualitatively, then are described in narrative writing.

Results

Factors Affecting Teachers' Use of the Strategies to Develop Pedagogical Knowledge

From the interviews, it was found that factors affecting EFL teachers in developing pedagogical knowledge related to two main categories: positive factors (factors assisting EFL teachers in developing pedagogical knowledge) and negative factors (factors hindering EFL teachers from developing pedagogical knowledge).

Positive factors

Qualitative data from the interviews illustrated that five factors assisted the participants in professional pedagogical development, namely (1) support from superiors, (2) colleagues' contributions, (3) school policies, (4) self-motivation, and (5) learning community. First, six out of ten interviews claimed that they gained a great deal of support from their superiors for participating in workshops and conferences on improving teaching quality, providing learning opportunities, as shown in the following examples:

When I have some opportunities to attend workshops or conferences, I usually suggest for participating in these workshops and they usually say yes to me. Moreover, when knowing some workshops, my bosses usually inform me and rearrange my teaching schedule to help me attend the workshops. (Teacher 2)

My superiors usually invite some foreign English teachers to join the teachers' group discussions, so I can learn from a different perspective. (Teacher 5)

Second, the factor called colleagues' contributions were also stated by six interviewees who said that their colleagues helped them receive the schedule of workshops and gain teaching experiences so that they could develop pedagogical knowledge. The interviewees said:

Sometimes, my colleagues suggest some teaching techniques to help me teach better, so the assistance of my colleagues is a factor affecting my process of developing pedagogical knowledge. (Teacher 10)

Positively, the opportunities to participate in workshops are due to my colleagues' recommendations. (Teacher 1)

Third, two out of ten interviewees reported that they were affected positively by the school policies. Specifically, the school policies of professional development and rewarding motivated the interviewees to develop their pedagogical knowledge. The interviewees explained:

In my school, there is a policy that helps teachers to develop their professions. For example, in some particular year, I can take some academic courses or training programs. (Teacher 4)

Moreover, there are some policies on rewarding good teachers. It really motivates us to develop our knowledge. (Teacher 9)

Fourth, two participants expressed that their self-motivation was also a positive factor affecting their pedagogical knowledge development. The self-motivation for developing pedagogical knowledge was evolved from observing students' progress, receiving compliments, showing their knowledge, and solving teaching problems, as demonstrated below:

Furthermore, when I see my students progress in their studying, I feel really motivated to develop my profession. Also, good words from my students, my parent students, or my superiors motivate me very much to develop my pedagogical knowledge. Lastly, when I have the knowledge, I can express my knowledge to the other teachers. Therefore, knowledge is also a factor affecting me to develop pedagogical knowledge. (Teacher 5)

Therefore, I need more time to search for the information to solve my problems. It is also a motivation to develop my pedagogical knowledge. (Teacher 7)

Last, the learning community was reported to assist one interviewee in developing pedagogical knowledge. The interviewee explained learning community was an environment where teachers can discuss and share their knowledge. The interviewee said:

In my school, there is a learning community of the teachers. We can discuss and share our knowledge, so we can learn from each other. It also motivates us to learn because my leader always supports the members to develop their profession. (Teacher 9)

In summary, the findings showed that more than half of the participants were affected positively by the two factors, i.e. support from superiors and colleagues' contributions in their process of professional pedagogical development. Next, one-fifth of the interviewees responded that the factors school policies and self-motivation assisted them in developing pedagogical knowledge. Finally, one interviewee considered the factor learning community as a helpful factor affecting the process of developing pedagogical knowledge.

Negative factors

With respect to negative factors affecting EFL teachers' professional pedagogical development, thematic analysis of the qualitative data proposed five factors, including (1) lack of time, (2) excessive workload, (3) lack of intrinsic motivation, (4) lack of knowledge, and (5) difficulty in reaching the literature. First, six out of ten interviewees expressed that they did not have enough time for professional development activities such as reading books and journals, reflecting upon teaching practices, and attending workshops and conferences due to their busy schedules. The following examples explained the interviewees' opinions in detail:

On the other hands, I don't have much time to read books or reflect my teaching. (Teacher 1)

In a negative way, I am very busy with my classes and activities at school, so I don't have much time for developing pedagogical knowledge. (Teacher 4)

The factor most affecting my process of developing pedagogical knowledge is time. I am really busy with my teaching schedule, so I don't have much time for reading books or participating in workshops. (Teacher 5)

Second, in addition to lack of time, the excessive workload was reported to prevent two interviewees from developing pedagogical knowledge. Specifically, heavy workload made the interviewees too busy and tired for professional development activities, as shown in the following examples:

In a negative way, I am very busy with my classes and activities at school, so I don't have much time for developing pedagogical knowledge. (Teacher 4)

However, I have to work very much, so I sometimes feel tired to read books or I don't have time to attend workshops. (Teacher 10)

Finally, each of the three factors, i.e., lack of intrinsic motivation, lack of knowledge, and difficulty in reaching the literature, were uttered by one interviewee as a negative factor affecting the interviewees' process of professional pedagogical development. They declared respectively:

A negative factor is that I don't have motivation to read books or journals. Therefore, I think that the teacher needs motivation and desires to learn and develop their pedagogical knowledge. (Teacher 6)

I think that a negative factor affecting my process of developing pedagogical knowledge is that I don't have enough knowledge. For example, when I find that I am not correct in my teaching, I can't correct it myself at that time. (Teacher 7)

In my teaching context, when I have something that I don't understand, I usually search for the information on the internet; however, some useful materials require me to pay much for reading. Therefore, it is also a disadvantage. (Teacher 2)

Overall, the results from the interview data revealed that lack of time was a major factor hindering EFL teachers from developing pedagogical knowledge. The others were a heavy workload, lack of intrinsic motivation and knowledge, and difficulty in accessing the literature.

Discussion

Factors Affecting Teachers' Professional Pedagogical Development

Initially, according to the results gained from the interviews, the participants reported that they were supported mainly by five factors, namely support from superiors, colleagues' contributions, school policies, motivation, and the learning community. First, support from superiors and colleagues' contributions were perceived to be the most important support by the majority of the interviewees. This implies that teachers believed that their superiors and colleagues are the best sources for professional pedagogical development. In other words, it can be assumed that a supportive working environment assisted teachers in professional development. Next, for a minority of the participants, school policies of professional development support and rewards were shown to positively affect the interviewees in terms of facilitating learning conditions and praising their effort of pedagogical development. This may indicate teachers' satisfaction with their workplace in such a way that teachers felt that their expectations and needs for professional development were satisfied by their schools. Moreover, surprisingly, the learning community was also reported to encourage one interviewee in professional pedagogical development. That interviewee stated that the learning community was a supportive environment where teachers discuss and share their knowledge. Conclusively, these findings may reinforce the importance of a supportive working environment, as previously discussed, in the process of professional pedagogical development.

What is more, in terms of negative factors hindering teachers from professional pedagogical development, results from the interviews revealed that the five factors, including lack of time, excessive workload, lack of intrinsic motivation, lack of knowledge, and difficulty in accessing the literature, were the main negative factors affecting their process of developing pedagogical knowledge. In detail, the most often-cited barrier was insufficient time which prevents teachers from doing professional development activities such as reading books and reflecting on their teaching practices. This finding implies that

teachers need time to learn and grow because real learning cannot happen in short periods of time like a ten-minute break at school. Moreover, excessive workload, as a negative factor reported by two teachers and lack of time was closely related because workload affects teachers with busy timetables and those who experience extreme tiredness. These two factors may lead to lack of collaboration and communication among teachers (Karaaslan, 2003), which weaken the supportive working environment in schools. Lack of knowledge and difficulty in accessing the literature were other factors considered to be important hindrances to professional pedagogical development by two interviewees. Therefore, it is implied that although developing pedagogical knowledge emphasizes the importance of the personal desire for professional development, there seems to be a consensus that teachers cannot develop their profession completely by themselves (Karaaslan, 2003).

Finally, a detailed observation from the results of the interviews showed that the minority of the participants perceived self-motivation as the factor that assists teachers and lack of intrinsic motivation as the factor that hinders teachers from developing pedagogical knowledge. Thus, the researcher, in the current study, saw self-motivation and lack of intrinsic motivation as identical in terms of factors affecting teachers' professional pedagogical development, then named them teachers' motivation. Teachers' motivation was identified as an important factor by three interviewees. This showed that these teachers realized their roles in their own process of professional pedagogical development. Teachers, therefore, needed to take responsibility so as to start and continue their professional development. However, the number of participants who reported a lack of intrinsic motivation as a negative factor seemed small compared with the other negative factors. That is, the majority of the participants believed that hindrances in developing pedagogical knowledge came from extrinsic factors.

Suggestions for Teacher Professional Pedagogical Development in the Context of Vietnam

Drawing on the current research findings and the results of Dang's (2020) study, the researcher put forward some thoughts and suggestions for teacher pedagogical development, teacher training, and the school environment.

For teacher professional pedagogical development

One of the findings of the study was that the importance of a supportive working environment was stressed by most of the participants. However, in Dang's (2020) study, the activity- discussing with colleagues was not strongly supported by the majority of the participants. Half of the teachers did not find this activity critical to their pedagogical development. That is to say, teachers were sensitive to and concerned about how useful the information they received is and from whom they received the information. The teachers, therefore, should recognize their roles in the pedagogical development process in order to build a mutually beneficial relationship among colleagues for the purpose of sustaining teachers' professional development. Moreover, the school administrators should develop "a climate of mutual support" (Nunan & Lamb, 1996, p. 210) and build a mutual trust among teachers to encourage discussing and sharing knowledge. These can be achieved by allowing teachers to become involved voluntarily in this activity and decide with whom they want to work.

Another finding of Dang's (2020) study was that though the participants stated that they were aware of their process of developing pedagogical knowledge and the activity, reflecting on teaching were employed frequently by the majority of teachers. Action research did not receive much attention from these participants. It could be explained by the lack of intrinsic motivation in their professional development as a finding from the current study. This is contradictory because action research was also considered as a reflective activity that requires teachers to gather information about their own teaching (O'Hanlon, 1996). In other words, teachers did not fully understand what action research is, how it is conducted, and what benefits it brings to them. Therefore, it is a good idea for teachers to learn more

about action research, undertake it, and learn from these experiences. Further effort can be invested by the school administrators and the project manager of National Foreign Language who are capable of organizing conferences, training, and workshops on action research with the intention of enhancing teachers' knowledge of educational action research.

One of the study's important findings was that most of the teachers in the study believed that they were affected negatively by extrinsic factors. Teachers may not have sufficient time due to their workload or private business, or institutional support may be lacking as well to develop pedagogical knowledge. However, teachers themselves are the best source for professional development as long as they are responsible for their own development (Karaaslan, 2003). The implication of this might be that teachers should view education as a long and on-going process and grab hold of their pedagogical development.

For teacher training and school environment

Clearly seen from the findings of Dang's (2020) study, lack of knowledge constituted a serious impediment to teachers' pedagogical development. It appeared that teachers in the study could not improve the weaknesses stemming from their educational background. Therefore, this suggested that the teacher trainers and training planners should be sensitive enough to teachers' knowledge needs in terms of their professional development. More precisely, they should be aware of the changes of teachers' needs and the principles of adult development to provide suitable assistance. Furthermore, individual teachers should inform the school administrators or training planners about their professional development needs to contribute to the quality of teacher support. It is also to raise their awareness of their own development. Subsequently, teachers should be variously supplied with professional development activities appropriate to their needs, educational backgrounds, and interests.

This study put forward another finding which was about teachers' work time, workload, and difficulty in accessing the literature in the field of English language teaching. Specifically, lack of time and excessive workload were perceived to be important hindrances to most of the participants' pedagogical development. Therefore, it is a good idea to allow teachers to be flexible in their working hours on certain days. This could give teachers some spare time to promote professional growth. Additionally, a group of interested teachers can voluntarily engage in initiating, organizing, and participating in professional development activities such as preparing workshops, designing web pages, working in developmental projects, and building source literature, while others may be expected to contribute to the group. Consequently, teachers can access diverse types of professional development activities and work in a motivating atmosphere.

Conclusion

The current research was conducted with the aim of identifying some factors affecting teachers' professional pedagogical development. Drawing on the results of this study, five factors that assisted EFL teachers were the support from superiors, colleagues' contributions, school policies, self-motivation, and the learning community. In contrast, five factors that hindered EFL teachers were found to be lack of time, excessive workload, lack of intrinsic motivation, lack of knowledge, and difficulty in reaching the literature. This study was not without its inevitable limitations as the qualitative data was from ten participants. In other words, the participants of the study could not be seen as representative of all Vietnamese teachers. Further research can replicate this study with larger groups of participants in diverse EFL contexts in order to increase the reliability and generalizability of results.

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