

Teachers' Perceptions On EFL Professional Development At A Public University In Vietnam

Em Hà Thành Thảo

Foreign Language Faculty - University of Finance and Marketing,
Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam
httem@ufm.edu.vn



Abstract – With more innovation in teaching methods, it requires EFL teachers to be involved in professional development to meet the requirements of the learners, school and society. Previous studies have been done in this area, but most of them are conducted in English speaking countries. This research aims to investigate teachers' perceptions of the importance of EFL professional development. This research is conducted at a public university in Vietnam with participation of eight teachers of English involved in individual interviews. The results show that most of them are fully aware of the importance of EFL professional development, and make suggestions about the activities that administrator of the university can consult to build teaching staff who can meet various needs of learners nowadays.

Keywords – Teachers' perceptions; EFL professional development; public university; Vietnam.

I. INTRODUCTION

Since the introduction of the Vietnamese open-door policy in 1986, English has experienced a rushed shift from being dismissed to the language fever in 1990s (Phan et al., 2014).

In December in 1996, English was confirmed as the first foreign language in Vietnamese schools at the Central Party Committee meeting on education. The Vietnamese Ministry of Education and Training is fully committed to the reform of general education and the promotion of English as the first foreign language in the curriculum.

Le (2002) also claimed that the Vietnamese government considers teaching English to be a big support for Vietnam's open-door policy. In other words, English has played a vital role in both regional and global economic participation.

However, the English language teaching in Vietnam has proved to be of low quality over the years in spite of reforms ranging from textbooks to teaching methodology. This problem has been clarified from a number of studies by different researchers (Le, 2000; Tran, 2000; Pham, 2001). For example, a large proportion of EFL teachers from various backgrounds still apply traditional methods in their teaching (Tran, 2000).

Many previous studies have shown that Teacher Professional Development is one of the main means of enhancing the quality of English language teaching. In particular, MacDonald's (1991) study indicates that the teachers' commitment to change themselves determines the quality of teaching and the quality of school improvement. Duong (2003) also shares the same idea that teacher development is only created from successful, effective and high-quality education

Tedick (2005) also contends that good quality in education requires an on-going development in teaching. In fact, teachers need to set a good example for their learners, so they cannot neglect their own professional development. As teachers, they must renew their knowledge and update their skills on a regular basis to keep pace with the latest innovation in their area.

Many people have been increasingly interested in the substantial changes in foreign language teaching, especially in terms of professional development activities (Nunan, 2001). Therefore, the teachers feel that they have to improve their professional knowledge in order to meet the demands of the institutions as well as the learners themselves (Murray, 2010).

This study aims to investigate teachers' perceptions of EFL professional develop as well as identifying specific types of activities expected to do in terms of professional development for EFL teachers. The research focuses on two main research questions.

- 1.What is the importance of continuing professional development as an ELF teacher?
- 2.What activities do teachers need to support their PD?

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Various concepts on EFL professional development

The traditional view of teacher development is that it consists of one-time workshops, presentations, and graduate courses that teachers must enroll in to stay current with educational research (Birman et al., 2000).

This perspective happens to confine professional development to simply the activities organized by educational institutions, therefore professional development is prescriptive, short-term, segmental, and incoherent in terms of teachers' needs and previous or current knowledge.

Professional development is "an ongoing learning process in which teachers engage willingly to learn how to best adjust their teaching to the learning needs of their students," according to Diaz-Maggioli (2003), who links it to student learning (p. 1).

Meanwhile, Nguyen (2008) contends that professional development is the method teachers use to advance themselves. Its significant influence may be seen in raising educational standards in general, as well as helping to improve student learning and teachers' instruction.

Mizell (2010) argues that continuing professional development includes both formal and informal activities, such as discussions among coworkers, independent reading and research, observing coworkers' work, or receiving other learning from peers. Formal activities include conferences, seminars, workshops, collaborative learning among members of a work team, and courses at colleges or universities.

In his research paper published in 2015, Wilson likens professional development to a variety of endeavors and methods that "grow teachers' professional thinking and practice and improve the standard of teaching and learning" (p. 1).

Professional development is described as "a wide variety of specialized training, formal education, or advanced professional learning intended to help administrators, teachers, and other educators enhance their professional knowledge, competence, skill, and effectiveness" by The Great Schools Partnership (2013). (p. 1).

Recently, Husu and Clandinin (2019) consider Professional Development a process in which teachers "manage to perform various tasks from to learn and experience the need to do their work better" (p. 4)

2.2. The importance of EFL professional development

There have been numerous studies in favor of the importance of professional development for teachers. One of them is the research paper by Karabenick and Noda (2004) which notes that teacher development is a key factor for enhancing the quality of teaching practice as well acquiring the most updated knowledge in the field. Another author called Mizell (2010) points out that continuing efforts in professional development are essential for teachers to apply the best methods to meet the demands of their students; while Richards and Farrell (2005) contend that continued professional development for teachers can assist in-service practitioners in staying up to date with instructional standards and resources, as well as prevent them from falling behind.

Professional knowledge, in the words of Meng and Tajaroensuk (2013), "seems to be a sort of transitory knowledge," requiring routine cultivation to be kept up to date and polished in order to adjust to the unavoidable change in societal demands. Language teachers have "challenges as a result of changes in curriculum, national evaluations, and student demands" on a regular basis during their careers as educators (Richards & Farrell, 2005, p. vii).

According to Murray (2010), professional development helps teachers come out of their isolation and enables them to talk about and get rid of any potential annoyance they could experience as a result of specific issues they run into in the classroom. Therefore, Professional Development is essential, and student learning suffers when instructors don't receive appropriate professional development (Mizell, 2010, p. 6). Scholars from a variety of backgrounds who have discussed the significance of teacher professional development (CESE, 2014; OECD, 2009; Villegas-Reimers, 2003) are in agreement that it has a positive impact on teachers personally and professionally, as well as on student learning and the institutional and national implementation of educational reforms. Scholars from a variety of backgrounds who have discussed the significance of teacher professional development (CESE, 2014; OECD, 2009; Villegas-Reimers, 2003) have all come to the same conclusion: teacher professional development has a positive impact on teachers personally and professionally, as well as on student learning and the institutional and national implementation of educational reforms.

According to a Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation (CESE) (2014) analysis of the overall effects of Professional Development, "offering professional development to teachers does have a favorable influence on student outcomes" (p. 2). According to CESE (2014), this effect is the result of three steps: Professional Development improves teacher knowledge and abilities, greater knowledge and abilities enhance classroom instruction, and enhanced instruction improves student results. The OECD (2009, p. 49) lists the eight functions that teacher professional development fulfills:

- To update individuals' knowledge of a subject in light of recent advances in the area
- To update individuals' skills, attitudes and approaches in light of the development of new teaching techniques and objectives, new circumstances and new educational research
- To enable individuals to apply changes made to curricula or other aspects of teaching practice
- To enable schools to develop and apply new strategies concerning the curriculum and other aspects of teaching practice
- To exchange information and expertise among teachers and others, e.g. academics, industrialists
- To help weaker teachers become more effective

III. METHOD

This paper takes a qualitative approach to investigate teachers' perceptions of the importance of EFL professional development. An interview is conducted individually with eight English teachers of the same faculty at a public university in HCM city. Six of them are female and two are male. The average age is between 30 to 45. The language used in this interview is English for this would be easier for them to convey some special terms in this area. All the conversations between the researchers and the interviewees are recorded and transcribed into a full text.

IV. FINDINGS

4.1 Participants' viewpoints on EFL professional development

Through the interview, all participants show full awareness of the importance of EFL professional development. It is also remarkable that some participants view EFL professional development as a necessity for self-improvement, giving themselves more opportunities in teaching career while the others think that EFL professional development is an obvious trend for the development. In particular, participant 1 believes that EFL professional development is a golden chance for them to 'maintain, upgrade levels, review and improve professional knowledge'. Similarly, participant 3 is convinced that EFL professional development helps them to learn better ways to teach, engage in latest trends in teaching. This viewpoint is also shared by participant 4 who thinks it is important to continue to acquire and update their professional knowledge. These participants are 'afraid to fall behind the others in this digital era'.

Some other participants are concerned about the requirements of the modern society and the educational institutions. They said: 'I have always engaged in EFL professional development to meet the increasingly higher standards of learners, schools and society'. (Participant 5)

This perspective is also shared with the rest of the participants.

4.2 Some suggested activities to support EFL professional development

Many activities are recommended as EFL professional development. However, they can be put into four main categories:

English proficiency

Most participants claim 'English proficiency is the top priority for an English teacher'. With a high level of English proficiency, teachers can 'build more trust in their students'. So, EFL professional development cannot suffice without this mention. Some participants recommend that there should be 'Facebook groups' where teachers can 'stay connected with each other and practice using English'. (*Participant 2 and 6*). Another participant also shared that she often practiced speaking with her colleague whenever they met on campus. This gave her a great opportunity to use English naturally, which is a great support for her teaching. (*Participant 5*)

Teaching methods

Teaching methodology is another concern among participants. Most of them believe that there are numerous ways for teachers to exchange ideas of teaching English. For example, *participant 7* claims 'If teachers want to update their knowledge of teaching, they can go to workshops and seminars where they can have direct discussions with well-known experts'.

These days, this opportunity is also extended to online platforms where busy teachers can juggle their work and listen to compelling ideas in EFL teaching. Alternatively, teachers can share their teaching ideas by conducting class observation sessions where one teacher sits in on another teacher's class, then give feedback to each other. This 'helps to promote the sense of belonging among teachers of the same faculty' (*Participant 3*) as 'teachers feel that they are given support by their colleagues' (*Participant 4*) and this practice is also believed to 'sharpen teaching capacity among teachers'. (*Participant 1*)

IT

Among the activities to support EFL professional development, applying IT in teaching is mentioned as 'a tool to make the lessons more interesting'. Therefore, teachers should be involved in short courses to learn about how to appeal students to our lessons by applying information technology. One participant said that the schools should 'give financial support so that teachers can have access to this'. (*Participant 3*). *Participant 8* contends that future generation 'cannot accept a teacher who poor at IT skills'.

Research

Despite not being given much attention from participants, this activity cannot lack if teachers expect to make an improvement in teaching. They consider this activity is 'a chance for teachers to reflect themselves about their teaching methods' (*Participant 1*). Another participant thinks that research is the prerequisite for EFL professional development. There should be a community where scores of teachers who do research and share ideas to keep pace with constantly changing society. (*Participant 6*)

V. DISCUSSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The results of the research show that all these teachers have gained insightful understanding of the importance of EFL professional development. They highly expect to be involved in activities to enhance their professionalism. Their expectations as well as beliefs towards EFL professional development prove to confirm the previous studies on this area.

Teachers' responses to EFL professional development are clear evidences for the administrator of the university to pay more attention to organizing activities so that teachers have more opportunities to develop their professional skills.

The activities would be preferred to focus on five main categories. First of all, in order to make sure that teachers have adequate English proficiency level, there should be small communities where teachers can interact and learn together. This would be difficult to do if teachers have busy work schedule. Another suggestion is that class observation should be encouraged among teachers so that they can develop teaching skills and stay connected within the faculty. In addition, workshops or seminars should be organized more frequently so that teachers can keep themselves updated with the latest trends in teaching. Teaching English in the digital world also requires teachers to be skillful in using IT skills, therefore it would be advisable for the universities to provide teachers short courses to be equipped with necessary IT skills, which helps to give them more confidence to survive in a

modern class. Last but not least, doing research cannot be separated from EFL professional development. If teachers do more research, they are more likely to make innovation in their teaching, thereby satisfying various needs of learners.

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