

# Elf Teachers Perceptions Of Professional Development Programs In A Province Of Vietnam

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## ABSTRACT

The study investigated the professional development (PD) training the high school English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers have attended, their perceptions and their expectations for future PD, since the clarification of their needs would help facilitate both the national and local department of education and training decide what kinds of training are necessary and appropriate for the local needs. This also contributed to promoting the quality of PD training and enhances teachers' motivation to participate. The study only focuses on the needs of high school EFL teachers in the EFL context with a desire to fill in the gaps of training expectation and current training, as well as to recognize any difference in the training expectations of EFL teachers before and after the COVID 19 pandemic

**Keyword:** professional development (PD), English as a Foreign Language( EFL), Continuous Professional Development (CPD), COVID 19 pandemic, Teacher professional development ( TPD.)

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Continuous Professional Development (CPD) is a greatly valued and encouraged practice with all teachers regardless of level. Richards (2015) states that it assists teachers in maintaining their enthusiasm and can directly affect levels of satisfaction, proficiency and knowledge, teaching skills, attitudes, belief and competence in reflection, enhancing the chance of success.

So, in this study will look at the PD training undertaken by EFL teachers in the author's province to gain an understanding of their perceptions and expectations for future PD.

The author will first analyze the PD activities themselves to look at practicality, appropriateness and frequency, then they will look into the differences between the future teacher expectations when compared with the current training.

The main two focusses being to first look at the professional development activities that the teachers have attended which have been provided by the national and local government, their practicality, appropriateness and frequency of occurrence. Then to look at what is being required for further professional development for high school teachers in the Thai Binh province – particularly after the Covid pandemic.

The EFL professional training includes formal conferences, seminars, courses, workshops and other events whereas independent research, peer learning and information exchange between staff are available informally.

So, the main questions are:

1. What PD do the teachers engage in to develop their professional skills?
2. How do the teachers react to the PD?
3. What future expectations do these teachers have?

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

### Teacher Professional Development (TPD)

Such development teaches the teacher how to learn and how to use their knowledge gained to help their students learn too (Avalon 2011). Teachers can learn through taking part in training programs, reflecting on their own practice, and reflecting on the teaching practices of colleagues that they have observed. The surrounding social environment is crucial to the success of this within a constructivist framework.

Part of a *constructivist paradigm* consists of a “time for telling” (Schwartz & Bransford 1998). Within this situation there are two terms used – “authoritarian” and “authoritative” – the first is a “transfer of knowledge” the other encourages discussion (Bakhtin 1981). A teacher can inspire internal conversations in their listeners (Bakhtin 1981; Vygotsky 2000), provided that the subject matter has caught the attention and interest of

those listeners (Vygotsky 1978) in that it builds on their earlier knowledge and therefore contributes directly to their learning.

For *Socio-cultural theory and learning*, Warford (2011) says that teacher learning is targeted by using socio-cultural theory and Vygotsky's ideas and concepts. Students find their own meaning in relation to their subject via appropriate socio-cultural items: conversational language or talking via a text. Teachers can't actually increase their knowledge unless they directly involve their prior learning and experience during their own learning process (Warford, 2011).

In their own areas of specialty, teachers they can be helped by those with greater knowledge (Vygotsky 1978) – these people could be colleagues, teachers from other institutions or others.

*In Metacognitive processes and learning*: Metacognition is part of self-controlled learning where teachers learn with our culture. People who are set in growth situations are learning to learn (Dewey 1916) and metacognition is the connection between metacognitive methods and information (Flavel 1979, 1987). Metacognitive techniques use a higher degree of reflection than cognitive methods do (Bratan 2005). The purpose is not to achieve any particular targets but to ascertain how they were achieved. Learners use these methods to plan, regulate, manage and direct their own learning (Boekaerts, Pintrich and Zeidner 2000; Flavell 1976; Zimmerman 2001, 2006). Such information is very important in order to realise which methods should be used in different situations as well as self-learning through metacognitive tactics.

TPD is crucial in making sure they have an in-depth knowledge of the subject matter, and are competent and have abilities from the constructivist paradigm, socio-cultural theory and learning and metacognitive methods and learning. So TPD is a teacher's professional growth and self-evaluation of their own teaching techniques as it occurs within their teaching with a focus on improving the efficiency of their teaching abilities whilst ensuring the learning requirements of students are met. It is also important in that it encourages innovation in teaching and learning methods.

### **Professional development for EFL teachers**

Richards (2005) states that teacher development is "a type of socialization into the professional thinking and practices of a community of practice." This is the creation of new information and theory by joining in specific social contexts and taking part in various actions and processes" – so not just about being a cognitive activity and the translation of and a transfer of knowledge and theories into practice.

According to Diaz-Maggioli (2003), professional development is "an ongoing learning process in which teachers engage voluntarily to learn how best to modify their teaching to the learning needs of their students." It is not something that is useful for all contexts but is still an evolutionary procedure of self-disclosure, reflective practice and progression that aims to create the best outcomes for over time in job related tasks. This also matches up with PD as seen by Johnston (2009) as collaboration by teachers creates a "melting-pot" of potential ideas. Richards (2008,171) has a similar definition. This is of course because there is a direct link between effective teaching and the achievement level of students. Also, as the area of ELT is constantly on the move, PD can help teachers keep themselves up to date with knowledge of new advancements and methods as they come to pass. PD is also a source of motivation, empowerment and invigoration for teachers. Murray (2010, 3) backs this up by stating that empowered teachers lead to improved performance and attitude in the students.

Borg (2015, 5) stated that many methods for PD are in the form of a "transmission paradigm" that turns teachers into knowledge consumers, and have to gain "received knowledge" in one-time sessions and then have to implement it directly in their classrooms. Johnson (2009) puts that PD is often thought of as something done by others for or to the teachers. These can then be rejected and seen as irrelevant to the teachers and their needs and so have minimal effect on their classroom work – i.e. the CPD is seen as a waste of time.

PD focuses then on five domains: knowledge of subject, teaching, the learner, professional attitudes/values and the practice and contextualization of language instruction which is in line with the five domains of the Vietnam English Teacher Competencies Framework (ETCF).

### **The Meaning & Role of PD**

#### ***Perspectives – The Individual***

PD is aimed at the goals of the institution and the personal objectives of the teacher as departmental performance and personal development go together well. PD and performance within a department are directly related. As a rule, teachers want to increase their professional knowledge and keeping up to date with new theory and practice in their field. In enhancing their teaching skills, so they also feel more confident and empowered to help their students achieve better results.

The following areas can be identified as PD areas: *subject-matter expertise, pedagogical expertise, self-consciousness, comprehension of the students, knowledge of the curriculum and resources and career progression.*

**Perspectives – The Institution**

Initial teacher training is enough for a new teacher to get going for the first few years in a school. New teachers generally have a high teaching load and are given less cumbersome subjects and classes to teach initially. After a while, the knowledgebase of these teachers becomes outdated or they can be called upon to teach subjects for which they have had no formal training, then PD could be useful and take the form of in-service training – which can directly/indirectly improve the performance of the whole institution. Such enhancements could be:

*Institutional Growth:* Where the institution as a wholes’ performance goes up. This can attract more students who then get better results.

*Professional Advancement:* This helps staff rise up the “chain” into more senior positions by giving them the appropriate upgrade in skills.

*Improved Student Learning Levels*

Where the aim is to increase the performance of the students, which in turn increases the reputation of professors and the institution. Programs are intended to benefit the school as a whole and not just the improvement of the instructors too.

A program coordinator will of course need a Master’s Degree in TESOL, but a new member of staff may also require some training in their abilities/skills in order to teach on the course as their current skills may not match the requirements of the job they will have to perform.

PD activities become an effective way of allowing for school curriculum renewal and makes sure teachers have a much greater self-ownership of the curriculum implementation (Burns 1999 p. 209).

There are five areas where Joyce (1991) suggests five institutional reform elements to which PD can contribute:

1. *Collaboration:* Building into being a culture with the broadest vision-directed horizons.
2. *Conduct Research:* Showing colleagues the results on school improvement, the effectiveness of teaching and other “in-house” developments.
3. *Localised Information:* Encouraging and employees to collect and analyse data about their students, schools and the effects of change.
4. *Initiatives concerning the curriculum:* Getting into collaboration with colleagues and business colleagues to bring about change and the same across the media.
5. *Educational initiatives:* Giving opportunities for employees to develop their own teaching skills and tactics.

**Professional Development related to teaching English in Vietnam**

Various reforms of education policy in Vietnam have caused the growth in demand for the high-quality teaching of the English language at all levels of the educational institutions. English is seen as a vital component for the modernization and globalization of education.

The English Teacher Competencies Framework (ETCF) was adopted in 2014 as part of the National Foreign Language 2020 Project (NFL2020). This has contributed directly to teacher PD since being approved (Dudzik & Nguyen 2015; Pham 2017). Details of the ETCF can be seen below:

<b>DOMAIN 1</b>	<b>Knowledge of Language &amp; Curriculum</b>
Competency 1.1a	Teacher’s language proficiency
Competency 1.1b	Working knowledge of CEFR
Competency 1.2	Language as a system
Competency 1.3	Understanding how languages are learned
Competency 1.4	Cultures of English-speaking countries
Competency 1.5	Academic content in English
Competency 1.6	Language curriculum
<b>DOMAIN 2</b>	<b>Knowledge of Teaching</b>
Competency 2.1	Language teaching methodology
Competency 2.2	Lesson planning
Competency 2.3	Conducting a lesson
Competency 2.4	Assessment of language learning
Competency 2.5	Resources
Competency 2.6	Technology
<b>DOMAIN 3</b>	<b>Knowledge of Language Learners</b>
Competency 3.1	Understand learners’ development to encourage & motivate them
Competency 3.2	Recognize developmental learner language to inform instructions
Competency 3.3	Reflect on learners’ values & prior learning
Competency 3.4	Develop learners’ creativity & critical thinking
<b>DOMAIN 4</b>	<b>Professional Attitudes &amp; Values in Language Teaching</b>
Competency 4.1	Showing professionalism in language teaching
Competency 4.2	Practicing cooperation, collaboration & teamwork in language teaching
Competency 4.3	Professional development & life-long learning
Competency 4.4	Contributing to the language teaching profession

<b>DOMAIN 5</b>	<b>Practice &amp; Context of Language Teaching</b>
Competency 5.1	Connecting learning beyond the language classroom
Competency 5.2	Reflecting on Language Learning & Teaching

So, this study was undertaken with the help of EFL teachers from high schools in Thai Binh, the findings should indicate teacher needs and assist program creators and administrators in establishing suitable professional development programs as well as highlight future research subjects into TPD programs.

### III. METHODOLOGY

#### Participants

This study involves the cooperation of 102 high school EFL teachers from a Vietnamese province. These participants were quite diverse in respect to their age, gender, experience, qualifications and backgrounds.

#### Data Collection Instruments and Analysis:

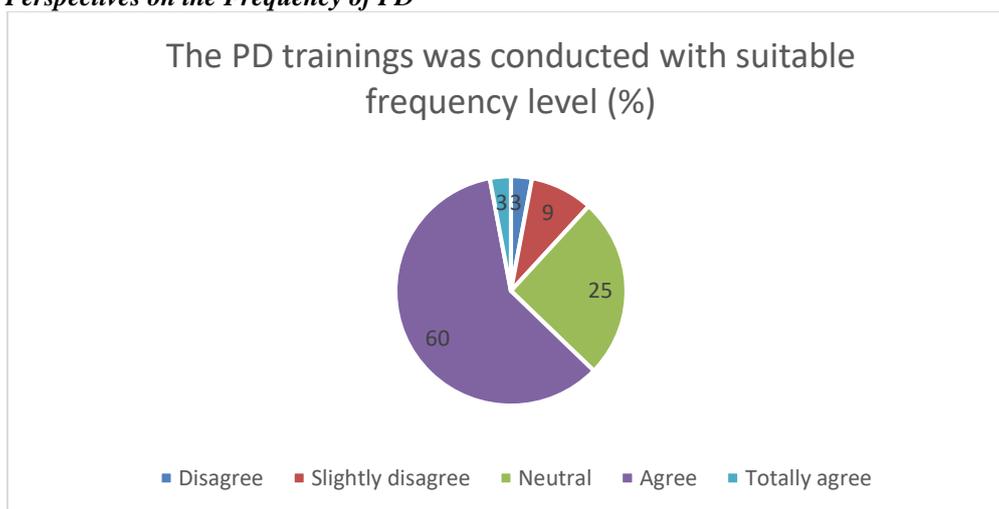
The data for the study was collected using questionnaires and interviews. The questionnaire was used to gather information about attendance at PD sessions, perceptions on practicality, suitability and the frequency of the sessions. It was also used to gather information about their future expectations including frequency of sessions, training methods and topics to be covered. A five-point Likert scale was used to give responses from a “strongly agree” 5 value through to a “strongly disagree” value of 1.

Interviews were used to gain a more complete picture from a small group of teachers, looking at their feelings, attitudes, expectations and thoughts. These were semi-structured to allow a standard format while investigating the teacher’s responses.

Surveys were used to gather data on aspects of PD in both informal and formal situations in a province of Vietnam. These were in 4 parts – first for background information about the respondents, then for details of formal and informal PD attendance. The third part covered training topics and perceptions of the teachers including frequency, suitability and practicality of PD. The final part looked into the future expectations of the teachers in PD. The topics in the survey were based on the five domains of the ETCF and their component competencies.

### IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

#### *Teacher Perspectives on the Frequency of PD*



More than half the respondents thought the frequency of training was ok (60%). However, a quarter of them were neutral about it (25%). Only the minority thought differently about it. A small number thought that PD happened too frequently.

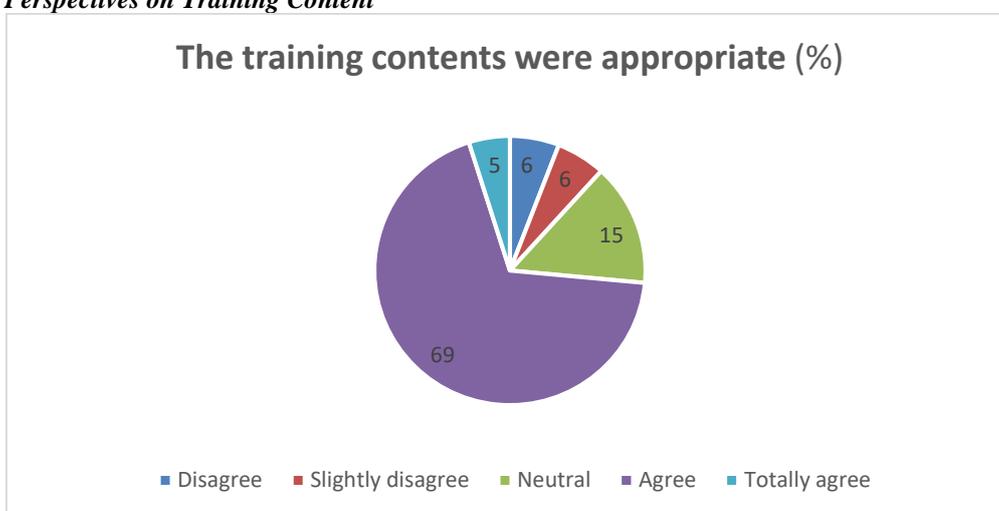
**Teacher Perspective on the Time, Duration and Content of PD Sessions**

Statement	No. of responses					Means
	(1) Totally disagree	(2) Disagree	(3) Neutral	(4) Agree	(5) Totally agree	
	1	2	3	4	5	
Training courses often take place at a suitable time.	6	7	20	65	4	3.5
The time that training courses often take place does not conflict with my school schedules.	6	11	17	64	4	3.5
The courses last for a suitable amount of time.	15	18	41	24	4	3.0

Most respondents agreed that the time the training takes is suitable and did not impact on their school schedules. This was mainly seen as these courses tended to be run inside summer holidays and so did not clash with classes. However, many thought that the actual duration of the courses was way too long and intense with too much information having to be studied over too long a period of time, often without any time for breaks, which had the effect of demotivating them.

Some had a problem with the location of the training courses. Some venues were some long distance from the teacher’s homes, so the length of travel required led to fatigue in many instances. The quality of teaching rooms is also brought into question, often with a lack of air conditioning (important given it was often too hot on the summer days) or WiFi access which are important facilities. However, many thought that the training content actually fit with their requirements.

**Teacher Perspectives on Training Content**



A large 69% of respondents thought that the content of the programs was fine and met their needs. 15% held a neutral position and only a very small number of respondents totally agreed or totally disagreed on the suitability of the content.

**Teacher Perspective on Practicality of PD Sessions**

Statement	No. of responses					Means
	(1) Totally disagree	(2) Disagree	(3) Neutral	(4) Agree	(5) Totally agree	
	1	2	3	4	5	
Training contents are practical.	6	6	15	70	5	3.6
I can often apply what I was trained in my classrooms.	5	3	18	71	5	3.7
The training contents help me solve the problems in my classrooms.	4	5	13	74	6	3.7

The mean score here is around 4 which suggests that teachers thought the course content was very practical with 69% having applied it to their own teaching. This is similar to the findings of Mai & Trang (2019). These results also agree with the findings of Mahmoudi & Ozkan (2015) which showed teachers benefitted from

the PD for improving their teaching. Only 5% of teachers could not apply what they had learned in their teaching – particularly when they had to deal with students of low proficiency.

**Teacher Expectations for Future PD**

***Frequency, Time and Duration:***

Suggestions from the respondents about the frequency of PD courses varied. Most of them (78.4%) thought that such training should only happen once or twice a year. Though 16.7% thought that once or twice per quarter would be sufficient. Though a small number thought once a year or once per two years was also sufficient. As official PD classes take place once in the summer holiday it can be concluded that the frequency does match teacher needs. All teachers agreed the summer was the best time to hold PD events. However, 83.3% of them thought it should only last one week in length. Some suggested they should start from the final week of June and last for one week. This complies with Mai & Trang (2019) which had teachers complaining that training was too theoretical in nature rather than being practical.

***Expected Session Content for Future PD***

<b>Training content</b>	<b>No. of responses</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
English skills (listening, reading, speaking, writing)	72	70.6
English knowledge (grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation)	50	49.0
Working knowledge of CEFR	26	25.5
Understanding how languages are learned	25	24.5
Cultures of English-speaking countries	37	36.3
Using authentic materials in English language teaching	49	48.0
Language curriculum	44	43.1
Developing curriculum and teaching materials	48	47.1
Methods for teaching language skills	60	58.8
Designing games for language classrooms	59	57.8
Teaching cross-cultural communication	40	39.2
Methods for teaching language knowledge	50	49.0
Classroom management	39	38.2
Assessment and evaluation	47	46.1
Designing and developing a language test	52	51.0
Creative feedback	38	37.3
Modern ELT methods	47	46.1
Designing and adapting materials	43	42.2
Develop learners' creativity & critical thinking	42	41.2
Understand learners' development to encourage & motivate them	37	36.3
Connecting learning beyond the language classroom	36	35.3
Technology-based learning or blended learning approach	42	41.2
Online materials development	33	32.4
Use of new technology/applications in the classroom	49	48.0
Use of different kinds of Learning Management Systems (LMS)	31	30.4
Professional development & life-long learning	41	40.2
Others	1	1.0

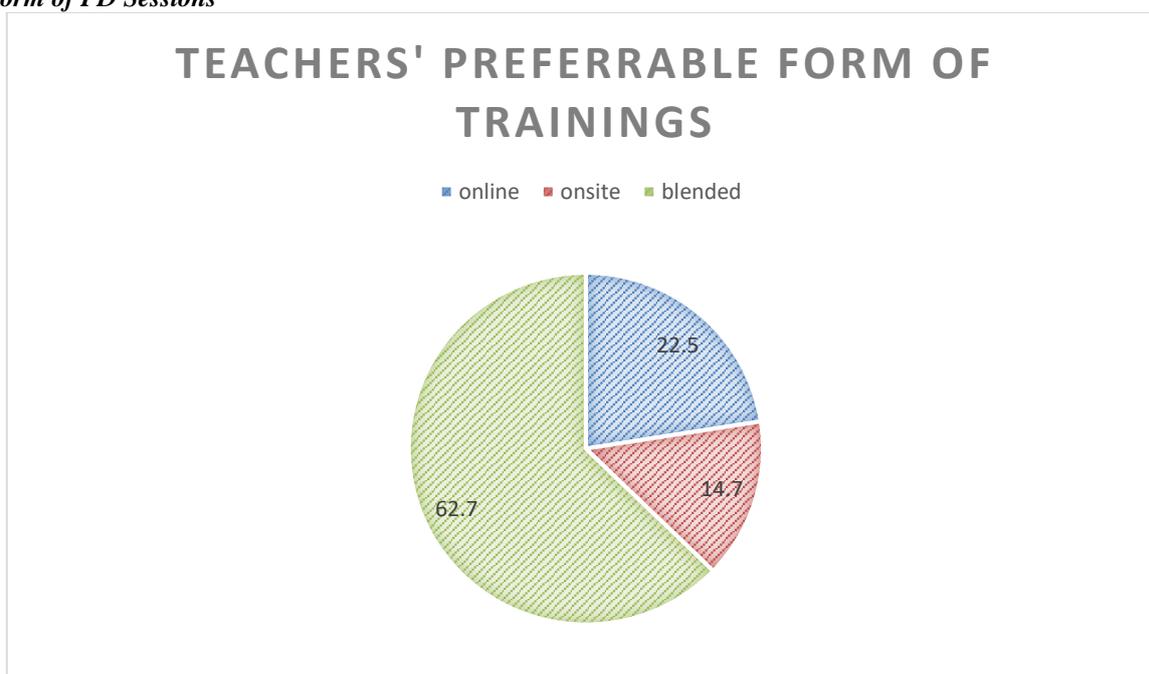
70.6% of respondents still expect to receive PD sessions to improve English proficiency, in particular communications skills in listening, reading, writing and speaking and 50% would still appreciate improvement in their vocabulary, pronunciation and grammar. This is different to Mai & Trang (2019) where this was ranked 5<sup>th</sup> in what teachers wanted to improve. Though it is agreed on in both studies that improving their English competency regularly was really important. This also differs from Igawa (2008) and Ozdemir (2013) who report from their studies that teaching methods were seen as more important.

Approximately 50% of the teachers want to get taught English knowledge teaching methods, a similar proportion which to learn about creating games for their language classes, creating tests, developing curricula and teaching materials and using reliable materials for teaching.

Even though the use of technology is encouraged, less than 50% are interested in being trained about its use in the classroom, and even less wanted to learn about blended learning techniques or producing on-line learning materials – though it was found that this was due to a lack of equipment for the purpose.

Designing assessments for ascertaining student performance were also favoured among 50% of the respondents.

### **Form of PD Sessions**



From this we can see that most respondents prefer an approach which combines on-site and on-line learning (62.7%). Some 22.5% would prefer this to be completely on-line, with only the last 14.7% wanting it to be completely on-site. The winning preference here seems to be justified by the respondents highlighting the flexibility of this approach coupled with still being able to have direct discussions.

## **V. CONCLUSION**

The findings indicated that education management and government education bodies should take careful note of the respondents' comments and suggestions into careful consideration.

The time and duration of the PD courses should be located in the summer holidays to prevent clashes with other teacher responsibilities during term time – which would increase their engagement.

The courses should not be too long or be run too intensively with proper breaks built-in to the proceedings to avoid teacher excessive fatigue – which would improve the uptake of the presented knowledge.

Teachers should be able to choose their training topics to fit their needs as there will be differences in what each teacher needs for the environment they work within and be able to rank topics in order of importance to them.

To improve training flexibility, a blended learning environment should be set up so that there are on-line sessions as well as in-person sessions for more practice and discussion.

Ensuring sessions are highly practical is advisable to address the urgent needs of teachers, and so have a good balance of theory vs practical. Teachers should be able to learn and have a go at hands-on experiences as it can encourage them to actively attend more professional programs. So after theory is delivered, then some practical can then be used to reinforce what they have learned in theory.

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