FROM TEACHERS' LEARNING TO TEACHING PRACTICE IN THE CLASSROOM LEVEL: A QUALITATIVE STUDY OF EFL TEACHERS AT A UNIVERSITY UNDER THE MINISTRY OF PUBLIC SECURITY

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ABSTRACT

Participating in in-service professional development activities plays a pivotal role in determining teachers' long-term professional development and the long-term success of the program they involve themselves in (Richards & Farrell, 2005). Specifically, this issue has received growing prominence in many institutions under the supervision of the Ministry of Public Security (MPS) towards the long-term objectives for practitioners, including EFL teachers, in developing their professionalism. However, little research has been conducted to examine the extent of applicability in terms of the EFL teachers' exposure to professional development opportunities (PDOs) in support of their teaching pedagogies. To address this gap, this study aims to explore the internally MPS-based PDOs as well as the PDOs' impacts on the EFL teachers' pedagogical implementations. Based on the purposeful sampling, six EFL teachers with at least five years of teaching experience were invited to participate in semi-structured interviews. The findings indicate that although the teachers the most PDOs are top-down and formal, they preferred self-initiated, informal ones. They also showed their positive personal reflection on the impacts of PDOs on their classroom-level decisions as well as several contextual factors mediating these impacts. The research results inform suggestions for the researcher's own institutional context in defining and addressing the existing teaching-and-learning weaknesses when it comes to the accessibilities of PDOs to facilitate teacher learning for the sake of teaching competence.

Keywords: Teachers' learning; teaching practice; classroom level; Ministry of Public Security

1. INTRODUCTION

It has been widely recognized that enhancing teacher competence is one of the keys to the improvement of education quality while teacher professional development (PD) plays a crucial part in improving teacher competence. However, English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers in Vietnam inadequately meet the expected standard in both quantity and quality (Nguyen, 2017). For example, Nguyen (2017) stated that teachers' limited language skills, inadequate pre-service training and contextual constraints hinder their implementation of changes. From my own experience of working as an EFL teacher at a university in the MPS, I have encountered various difficulties in accessing PD activities and adopting their outcomes in the classroom, which may be partially attributed to the

distinct features of teaching practice in the armed force context. Therefore, this study was conducted to gain an insight into the PD of an EFL teacher to non-majored English students in a higher education institution (HEI) in MPS. Using the case study approach, the study aimed to 'understand the intriguing nature of a particular case' (Dörnyei, 2007, p.152) guided by the following questions:

1. What professional development activities have the participants engaged in?

2. What are the perceived impacts of this engagement on their classroom teaching practice?

3. What factors affect the impact of the mentioned PD activities on the participants' teaching practice?

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Conceptualization of teacher PD

The term *professional development* has attracted scholarly discussion for decades, and it has been conceptualized in various ways (Cirocki & Farrell, 2019). Teacher PD is traditionally understood as a training model which primarily focuses on teacher's classroom skills. Richter et al. (2011) defined PD as the "uptake of formal and informal learning opportunities that deepen and extend teachers' professional competence, including knowledge, beliefs, motivation and self-regulatory skills" (p. 116). In this definition, PD can take both formal and informal forms. The *formal* form is characterized by an education program following a curriculum and addressing a specific issue (Cirocki & Farrell, 2019; Richter et al., 2011). This form of learning opportunity is usually organized as workshops or courses enabling teachers to have their knowledge and skills updated (Richter et al., 2011). On the contrary, according to Cirocki and Farrell (2019), *informal* learning opportunities usually take the form of 'self-initiated and self-directed' learning with the topic of study chosen following individual teachers' interests (p.2). This form of learning ranges from teacher individual engagement in activities of reading professional materials or observing others' classrooms to collaboration with colleagues in mentoring activities, and joining teaching or research groups.

2.2 Types of EFL teacher PD activities

Teacher PD is comprised of various activities that are changing and being implemented in numerous ways (Kennedy, 2005). Studies into types of teacher PD, especially the types that teachers expect to engage in are significant in understanding teachers' uptake of these activities. Recent works involving this aspect of EFL teacher PD showed remarkably similar results in types of PD activities, albeit diverse ones in teachers' preferences.

Alibakhshi and Dehvari (2015) explored the Iranian EFL teachers' engagement in PD activities and found that the participant teachers mainly participated in five categories of activities: PD through work, formal higher education, membership in professional associations, informal self-studies and participation in PD events. Among the activities, the teachers expressed their preference for PD through work as it was viewed as the main

source of practical knowledge while the least preferred one was presenting at PD events. Using the interpretive approach to examine perceptions of Thai EFL tertiary teachers on PD, Phothongsunan (2018) found that the participants identified teacher PD to be pursuing self-initiated activities, publishing academic works, presenting at conferences, improving student feedback and evaluation, doing research, attending courses and pursuing higher degrees. Notably, the majority of the teachers emphasized the necessity of their own universities' PD programs and higher degree education. It seems that the teachers showed their preference for top-down, formal PD activities.

The PD activities engaged by EFL teachers in these two studies are much similar to those reported by high school EFL teachers in Indonesia participating in a study carried out by Cirocki and Farrell (2019). The participants defined PD activities as school-based learning, higher education undertaking, out-of-school professional pursuit, a government scheme and self-directed learning. The school-based learning and higher education were the most preferred by the teachers. The self-directed PD was the least common among the participants which may be accounted for by their limited level of autonomy. Top-down, formal PD activities are also the most commonly attended by EFL teachers participating in Yücedağ and Şevik's (2021) study. The researchers interviewed EFL teachers at public schools in the capital cities of Turkey, Germany and Spain and reported that all of the teachers stated that they regularly engaged in PD activities such as the training or award bearing models (seminar, training course, conference, workshop, online course, webinar), mentoring/coaching models and community of practice models (informal dialogue with colleagues, observation visit to other schools). Seminars, training courses and conferences were the most popular activities.

2.3 Impacts of PD on EFL teacher practice

Several studies aiming to examine PD impacts on specific aspects of teachers' classroom performance reported positive results. Giraldo (2014) reported how novice EFL teachers in a language institute in Colombia improved the classroom practices during their participation in workshops addressing relevant issues in language teaching. Data from class observations revealed that what teachers performed were in line with the contemporary language teaching principles. For example, they employed activities that encouraged students' communicative and meaningful interactions, i.e. focusing more on meaning rather than forms. The lessons were coherent and involved strategies to motivate students. In a similar vein, Yücedağ and Şevik (2021) studied the impacts of a PD program of which the goal was to enhance the knowledge and practice of communicative language teaching for EFL school teachers in Turkey. Findings from the teachers' self-reported practice and classroom observations suggested that various aspects of their classroom performance were significantly improved. The main improvements included increased teachers' use of real-life English to foster students' conversational strategy implementation, more student-centeredness, more varied class activities to encourage students' involvement and increased focus on meaning instead of form.

Mixed results of PD program was presented in studies conducted in other contexts. In their qualitative study, Yook and Lee (2016) stated that the EFL teachers attached the improvement in their teaching practices to in-service training programs. Specifically, they believed that these PD activities enhanced their English proficiency, thus increasing their confidence in English use. Additionally, the PD experiences encouraged them to apply innovative teaching methods in the classroom. However, the participants explicitly expressed that these impacts were generally short-lived due to their perceived low English proficiency and the wash-back effects. This issue again necessitates the opportunities and favorable conditions for teachers to reinforce the acquired innovations. In a recent study, Le (2020) qualitatively investigated the impacts of the INSET courses which were designed to raise Vietnamese EFL school teachers' English proficiency teaching skills. Although in the interview the participant teachers expressed positive beliefs about the teaching techniques, grammar teaching strategies and increased confidence in speaking English in the classroom, lexical range that they gained from the courses, these outcomes were characterized as "surface learning" (p. 67). The findings from class observations reinforced this claim. Apart from employing some basic techniques, the teachers mainly employed the usual practices of knowledge transmission and adhered to coursebook tasks.

In terms of teachers' perception of the PD activities having the most impact on their practice, different results were reported. Alibakhshi and Dehvari (2015) explored Iranian EFL school teachers' perceptions of PD and found that PD activities had a positive influence on several aspects of teachers' teaching practice. The main PD activity that helped them to achieve such improvements was through their teaching. However, the Indonesian EFL teachers participating Cirocki and Farrell's (2019) believed that the most impactful PD activity was having informal talks with their colleagues. A study in Ethiopia by Girma et al. (2019) reported that the attending formal training courses and workshops were preferred by the teachers for its impacts on their practice.

In summary, research involving conceptualization of PD, types of activities, their impacts and influential factors has been reviewed in this section. These aspects of PD for EFL teachers are also dealt with in this study.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research methodology

The study utilizes qualitative design to explore EFL teachers' uptake of PDOs and their subjective perceptions of their impacts on their classroom practice. Dornyei (2007) argues that qualitative research is suitable to deal with individuals' opinions, experiences and feelings situated in their contexts. In this case, the research aims to examine the meanings the teachers make of their experiences with PD participation. Also, these teachers' adoption of PD activities' outcomes in their classroom may be shaped by various factors in a specific context of the MPS; thus, this research methodology can avoid producing "reduced and simplified interpretations that distort the bigger picture"

and be "very helpful in deciding what aspects of the data require special attention" (Dornyei, 2007, p. 39).

3.2 Research setting

The setting selected for this study is one of several HEIs under the MPS. Unlike other civil counterparts which are regulated by the policy of Vietnamese Ministry of Education and Training (MOET), this university functions in accordance with policies issued by both MOET and MPS. Thus, the PD for EFL teachers in this HEI are similar in some perspectives to that of HEIs out of the public security force but different in others. For instance, they are required to participate in various training courses to develop the teaching profession as well as the basic profession of a police officer. These courses are either intended for novice teachers or annually organized for those who are experienced.

3.3 The participants

The participants of this study were six EFL teachers having teaching experience of 6-16 years. They were purposefully chosen in order to represent a broad range of experience and to ensure that they had had certain access to PD activities. They taught general English and English for the specific purpose for English non-majored students. In terms of pre-service training, four of them attended the undergraduate program for EFL teachers while two attended an undergraduate program for the English language.

Table 1

The participants

Teachers	Gender	Age	Years of experience	Education
Teacher 1 (T1)	female	39	16	M.A.
Teacher 2 (T2)	female	42	16	M.A.
Teacher 3 (T3)	male	31	6	M.A.
Teacher 4 (T4)	female	29	6	B.A.
Teacher 5 (T5)	female	32	9	M.A.
Teacher 6 (T6)	female	33	10	M.A.

3.4 Data collection

The semi-structured interview in Vietnamese was employed to elaborate on the teachers' uptake PD activities. The questions were flexibly designed with prompts for follow-up questions to gather demographic information of the participants, their experience of PD, perceptions of the PD's impacts on the classroom practice and factors influencing the adoption of PD activities' outcomes into their classroom practice. As the research's aim is to investigate the teachers's experience of PD over a long period of time, the interviews questions were sent to them a few days ahead to allow them sufficient time to think about it. Due to the Covid 19 pandemic, the interview was conducted via Zoom platform. The author gained all of the respondents' permission to record the interview sessions. Each interview took place in between 40 minutes and one hour. During the interviews, a number of follow-up questions were asked to achieve in-depth answers for the research questions.

3.5 Data analysis

The interview data were analyzed following Braun and Clarke's (2006) guidelines. Firstly, the recordings were transcribed and translated into English. The author read the transcripts several times to be familiar with the data and to produce general ideas for coding. In the second step, the features of the data were coded and collated guided by the research questions and emerging ones listed in the first step. Then the codes were analyzed into themes for which the related data were collected. In the next step, the themes were reviewed for any problematic ones. Finally, the themes were defined and named before the report was produced.

4. FINDINGS & DISCUSSION

4.1 The participant teachers' engagement in PDOs

The data from the interview showed that the teachers had involved in various types of PD, comprising: (1) attending short-term training courses and workshops, (2) class appraisals (3) pursuing higher degrees, (4) paying visits to other universities, (5) being a member in the community of practice (CoP), and (6) doing research. These PD activities correspond to those reported by studies in other contexts such as Indonesia (Cirocki & Farrell, 2019) and in Iran (Alibakhshi & Dehvari, 2015).

In terms of the first category, all of the participant teachers reported that they had attended several training courses and workshops organized by the MPS and the university. For example, four of them attended a course held by the MPS in three weeks to enhance teaching methods for representatives of EFL teachers from all HEIs in the MPS. During the first two weeks, the teachers attended lectures delivered by expert teacher educators, followed by a field trip of one week to some universities in Singapore to explore the teaching practice. They also participated in another PD course organized by the MPS with a similar duration, albeit with a more specific goal which was to deal with large-sized classes. It was hosted by another university with teacher educators from native English-speaking countries. Besides, the other two participants did not engage in these two courses as they are intended for teachers who were appointed as 'lecturers' (teachers in MPS' HEIs hold the position of assistant lecturer for at least three years). Two out of six participants attended a mandated course on the certificate in pedagogy, for they were not trained at teacher education universities. The participants also mentioned several formal institution-based PD such as workshops on teaching methods testing and linguistic competence which were held on a regular basis. This type of PD took place either in the form of a discussion between administrators and the teachers on issues related to teachers, teaching, students and policies or lectures conducted by experts in pedagogy.

Class appraisals were undertaken among the participants as compulsory PD activities. All of them had participated in teacher appraising activities conducted as teaching contests at the faculty or institution level in which they had their lessons observed and evaluated by the board of expert teachers. Two teachers had attended ministerial-

level teaching contests to compete with the representative teachers from other HEIs under the MPS.

Pursuing higher education was also reported by all interviewees as a way for them to develop professionally, although for some of them studying for a master's degree was a requisite to be a lecturer and the content is of little practical value.

Another mandated PD activity revealed by the teachers was visiting other universities where they could "observe the teachers' lessons" (T2), "update with current teaching methods" (T3) and "discuss issues pertaining to teaching and establish rapport with the teachers there" (T1).

Being a member of the community of practice was the most preferred PD form among the participants. All of the teachers emphasized the experience acquired from exchanging ideas of instructional techniques with their peers in the faculty. According to T1, the faculty maintained "peer observation followed by professional discussions in groups to enable teacher's sharing their views on each other's classroom practice". T2, T3, T4, T5 and T6 were members of a group of the faculty's teachers who collaboratively prepare for the IELTS exam to meet the English proficiency required by the MPS. T2 joined a Facebook group for EFL teachers. T4 and T6 were involved in talks to share teaching experiences regularly held by teacher groups in language centers where they worked as part-time English teachers. The findings indicate that the teachers highly appreciated the PD activities that facilitate their autonomy and collaboration in professional learning which is also identified in a study among EFL teachers in Turkey by Yumru (2015).

Doing research is the least popular PD activity with only two participants responding that they conducted research on issues closely related to their practice as a form of PD. One teacher stated frankly: "I have conducted several institutional-level research projects. However, I think they are not as helpful as those that I learn informally which are 'trivial' but of practical use." (T5)

The findings show that although the teachers are involved in a variety of activities, the main ones are top-down, formal PD programs that are imposed on them by the administrators. This is in line with those found in recent pertaining studies (Cirocki & Farrell, 2019; Girma et al., 2019; Le, 2020; Phothongsunan, 2018; Yücedağ & Şevik, 2021). Despite the fact that the participants preferred informal, bottom-up professional learning, they had to attend many PD activities in the form of training courses and workshops. This may be due to the fact that in the MPS teachers are also police officers and they have required to strictly follow the commands and regulations. Girma et al. (2019) claimed that the Ministry makes the decision on the types and contents of PD activities without analyzing teachers' needs and interests, resulting in teachers having no chance to select PD activities but to attend the top-down ones.

4.2 Impacts of PD activities on the teachers' classroom practice

Generally, PD activities were viewed to have positive impacts on the teachers' classroom performance which are inclusive of their improvement in confidence in using

classroom English, class management skills, adoption of information and information technology (ICT), use of motivational strategies, student-centredness and differentiated teaching. The following excerpts from the interview responses exemplify the changes in their classroom performance:

As a result of engagement in PD activities, I have made progress in my teaching practice including transmitting knowledge, organizing students' activities, managing the class, and giving feedback. (T2)

Previously, I just transmitted knowledge to the students. Recently I have tried to inspire and motivate students… I have used information technology in delivering the lesson, organized games, and engaged students in activities which transform my class from teacher-centered to student-centered. (T3)

After many years of attending training courses, and pursuing PD out of the university, I have learned to deliver class activities in a varied and flexible way, applying ICT, adopting techniques from PD activities to better manage the class, better interacting with students and enacting activities to suit individual students and adapting activities in the textbooks to fit in the context. I feel that my teaching competence has been improved. (T6)

In terms of impacts created by individual forms of PD, the participants generally explicitly expressed that the training courses and workshops were of little practical value. One of the teachers commented that most of the contents of the training courses were "the repetition of the pre-service training" (T1). Discussing the effects of the courses and workshops she had attended, another reported that "most of the information provided was too general because they were designed for teachers from different universities and disciplines, so it was not very useful for my teaching practice" (T4). However, four teachers valued the training course which aimed to deal with the large classes. T1 gave her view on the course:

The course was very useful. The educators, who came from England and Australia, had well prepared for the course with relevant contents. The provided techniques, activities, and materials were practical, and thus applicable in my classroom. There were sessions focusing on learners' individual differences, technologies in language teaching and class management…

The success of the course may be attributed to its focus which is based on the teachers' needs and interests.

Pursuit of higher education was not perceived to be particularly applicable to their class behaviors. The Master's program was considered by a teacher to be irrelevant to her practice because she stated that "it was too much theoretical, research-oriented" and it's mainly useful to her in "providing with a Master's degree to be qualified for the job" (T1). This contradicts the situation in Indonesian schools where teachers believed Master's programs "combine theory, research and practice, but also involve ELT practicum which exposes them to the school-based learning" (Cirocki & Farrell, 2019, p. 9).

As regards the activity of teaching appraisal, T1 and T2 criticized teaching contests for being inconsistent with the real teaching context as "the students were purposefully selected" (T1) and the teacher had to "rehearse the lessons several times before officially delivering them" (T2), including classroom activities which were "infeasible to students in a real class". This finding agrees with the viewpoint of Darling-Hammond and McLaughlin (2011) who suggest that effective PD should be closely related to and derived from teachers' work with their students.

Conducting research was perceived to contribute to the changes in classroom behaviors to some extent by T2 and T6 because "the results were only applied by a small number of teachers" (T2) and "some studies' findings were too general and were not convincing enough for other teachers to apply in the classroom." (T6)

The data showed that the teachers tended to appreciate the impacts of their involvement in the CoP on their classroom practice, especially through peer observations and collaborations. Yumru's (2015) study conducted on EFL teachers in Turkey also indicated that they highly appreciated the PD activities that facilitate their autonomy and collaboration in professional learning. In the present study, when being asked about the PD activities that were the most impactful on their decisions in the classrooms, all of them referred to their engagement in teacher groups in and out of the university. T1 emphasized the important role of colleagues in her PD: "I learn a lot from the peers who I admire. They are committed to the job, competent in the profession and ambitious". T3 shared: "observing other classes and listening to comments from expert teachers are valuable experiences which can be applied to my class. I myself found the improvements in my teaching methods". T4 and T5 attached the importance to mentoring experiences: "I was inspired by other teachers and was eager to apply the teaching techniques I observe from them into my lesson" (T4) or "I am supported by the leaders of the faculty and other experienced colleagues". (T5)

4.3 Factors impeding teachers' adoption of innovations obtained from PD activities in the classroom

The first influential factor is the dominant top-down approach raised by the participant to be problematic. According to T5, the training courses and workshops failed to align with teachers' practical needs and focused on transmitting knowledge without allowing sufficient time for teacher application and reflection.

They just try to make an impression by naming the PD programs as 'teaching methodology' or 'testing', albeit offering stuff that teachers don't really need. In addition, those engaging in the programs are of various subject matters, from different universities with different contexts and individual needs, yet they are taught the same things… The duration of each PD event is insufficient. A workshop of a few hours, but they deal with 'big' issues." (T5)

The top-down and one-size-fits-all approach is criticized by researchers for its limited effectiveness in imposing innovations on teachers with "its lack of connection to the current classroom context" (Kennedy, 2005, p. 237).

The mandatory teacher appraisal based on class observation with a view to spreading innovations in classroom performance was believed to be ineffective in promoting changes. T2 argued:

A lesson delivered for appraisers' observation is unauthentic, just like a play, being irrelevant to the real class… A lot of activities used in the observed lesson are inapplicable to the usual classes. So I think there should be some adjustments to make this activity more applicable.

Another important factor mentioned by the teachers is related to the administration. There was a consensus among participants that banning students to use mobile devices greatly hinders their adoption of applying CLT and enactment of interactive learning activities in the classroom. Additionally, the participants complained that all the classrooms were under surveillance using a CCTV camera system and academic administrators frequently paid unexpected visits to check if they were following the curricula. These factors combined discourage teachers from translating innovations obtained from PD activities into the classroom.

Not all of my classes are inspected by the academic administrator but are constantly monitored by the cameras. Therefore, whenever I allow students to use their mobile phones for activities and games or move around in the class, I am always worried that the administrator may misunderstand us. (T4)

I think that the university's administration does not provide favorable conditions for teachers. The academic administrators excessively intervene in what teachers are doing in the class such as they monitor what I am writing on the board and whether what I am teaching has adhered to the lesson plan. (T6)

The negative effects of cameras installed in the classroom on teachers echoed those found by Birnhack and Perry-Hazan (2021). In their study, the participated teachers showed concern over misinterpreted footage, the 'chilling effect' on their classroom performance and the feeling of being distrusted by the managerial individuals.

Another factor emerging from the interview pertains to the students. Most of the students at the university were viewed by the teachers to be insufficiently motivated and passive in learning which resulted in their low engagement in learning activities (T2, T3, T4, T5 & T6). According to T4, this was a common problem among non-majored English students in the MPS as they studied the subject just to pass the exam. Students' low and heterogeneous background English proficiency was reported by T1 and T5.

Finally, some teachers highlighted several limitations related to facilities for teaching and learning. Inappropriate language laboratories, arrangement of tables and benches in the classroom and lack of devices for language teaching and learning are among the problems raised by the teachers. One of them expressed their view:

The language laboratories are just suitable for English-majored students. The installed softwares are out of date. Some other classrooms are equipped with interactive boards, but they are not user-friendly so teachers often encounter technical malfunctions. (T3)

In summary, the impacts of teachers' learning outcomes on their behaviors in the classroom are mediated by a number of factors. The participants generally reported those hindering their translation of PD outcomes into their practice which is crucial for other stakeholders such as ministerial and institutional policymakers.

5. CONCLUSION

The findings from the study indicated that most PD opportunities are formal, top-down and one-shot activities which were perceived to have a limited impact on the teachers' classroom performance. This is consistent with the findings by Richter et al. (2011). However, the participants highly appreciated the training course which provided 'handy instructional techniques' and 'useful material' of applicability in their classroom. This indicates that formal PD training can be effective if teachers' specific needs are taken into consideration. The analysis also revealed that they showed a preference for the CoP PD model mediated by the institutional climate which corresponds to the viewpoint expressed by Mohammadi and Moradi (2017).

The findings provide some implications for teacher PD. Firstly, any PD programs need to be varied and differentiated (Sansom, 2019) with individual teachers being considered. Secondly, it is important to promote teacher collaboration both in the implementation of PD programs and in their workplace. Collaborative professional inquiry is beneficial in developing teachers' pedagogical knowledge and skills, thus improving their teaching and student learning; developing a learning community and creating opportunities for teacher leadership (DeLuca et al., 2017). Thirdly, a favorable working climate in which the university and faculty's leaders encourage teachers' autonomy in the adoption of innovations should be created since teachers' translation of knowledge and skills acquired from PDOs can either be facilitated or hindered by a number of contextual factors.

It is recommended that further research should be conducted to illustrate a more holistic picture of PD for EFL teachers in the MPS. For example, a larger number of participants which may include other stakeholders such as administrators and students from other HEIs in the MPS will shed more light on the issue. Various instruments to collect data, especially classroom observations need to be employed to further guarantee the validity and reliability of the results.

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