

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT NEEDS OF LANGUAGE TEACHERS IN ONLINE TEACHING CONTEXTS

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Abstract: *The popularity of online teaching and learning has led to significant changes in the educational landscape, particularly in the primary school contexts where both teachers and young learners are found to experience some challenges in their adaptation to this new mode. The situation calls for teachers to enhance the knowledge and skills necessary for effective online instruction. The current study aimed to explore the professional development (PD) needs of primary school language teachers in online teaching contexts and how they identify these needs through reflexive and interactive positionings. This qualitative case study drew on data from semi-structured interviews with five in-service teachers who were responsible for delivering online courses in primary schools. Findings from thematic analysis indicate that teachers expressed their needs for a deeper understanding of the psychological, physical and behavioural aspects of pupils in the online learning setting as these aspects were not as explicit as in traditional classrooms. In addition, the participants were interested in techniques to facilitate personalised learning and strategies to communicate with students' parents. These needs are closely connected with how teachers position themselves, their students and parents. Discussions and implications of the study focus on the significance of incorporating teachers' voices in the development of effective professional training programmes and students' age-related characteristics as a learning resource for teachers.*

Keywords: *teacher professional development, young learners, online teaching.*

INTRODUCTION

There has been an agreement that teacher professional development (PD) has a profound effect on individuals' learning experiences and outcomes, regardless of whether the teaching context is in-person or online (Kennedy, 2016). Effective teacher PD fosters a deeper understanding of pedagogical approaches and supports continuous improvement in teaching effectiveness. Meanwhile, teacher PD should be viewed as a continuous process rather than an on-off effort (Kabilan & Veratharaju, 2013), as new practices proliferate rapidly over time and compel teachers to develop different competencies. Teachers need to stay current to effectively engage their students and incorporate new technological tools and instructional strategies (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017; Suchita et al., 2021). Hence, identification of teacher PD needs should be done regularly in order to provide a quality learning environment for learners.

Historically, online courses have been available for several years, but the widespread adoption of wholly online teaching did not become prominent until the COVID-19 pandemic. Traditionally, online education was limited to blended learning models, as a supplement to traditional face-to-face instruction, rather than a complete replacement (Means et al., 2009). However, the pandemic forced a rapid shift to wholly online teaching across educational settings, as schools needed to maintain continuity of learning while following social distancing measures (Zhang et al., 2020). When it comes to teaching young learners online, the transition has been particularly challenging. The pupils are believed to have a lot of energy but minimum concentration; thus, they learn better when engaging in hands-on experiences within a concrete environment (Hughes, 1986, as cited in Uysal & Yauz, 2015). They generally favour learning through using their hands and eyes since the physical activities facilitate their understanding of concepts. This reliance makes it difficult for children to learn effectively in online formats. Therefore, most teachers perceive online teaching to young

learners as something challenging. For example, the majority (60.5%) of 8,642 primary and secondary teachers in China perceived online teaching to young learners as “somewhat difficult” or “extremely difficult” (Song et al., 2020) while 80% of 45 Indonesian primary teachers were dissatisfied with online teaching (Fauzi & Khusuma, 2020). In addition, Taghizadeh and Hasani Yourdshahi (2019) found that most teachers in Iran did not have sufficient pedagogical and technological knowledge to adopt technology effectively to teach languages to young learners. It is suggested that primary teachers’ inadequacies of necessary skills result from limited online teaching experiences before the pandemic and insufficient formal training opportunities.

However, existing PD programmes for teachers conducting online courses for young learners often face several limitations. A primary issue is the “one-size-fits-all” approach, which provides general training that frequently adapts from traditional face-to-face teaching methods rather than focusing on the unique features of online environments. These programmes typically emphasised broad pedagogical strategies and technological tools without sufficiently addressing the specific challenges of online teaching for young learners, such as maintaining engagement and managing behaviour in a virtual setting (Zhang et al., 2020) or effectively using online communication tools. The adaptation of face-to-face strategies to online contexts can be inadequate, as it does not consider the different dynamics and interactions that online teaching requires. Additionally, existing PD programmes often overlook feedback from teachers working in online environments. This gap means that PD content may not reflect the real-world challenges, creating a gap between the training provided and the actual needs of teachers (Desimone, 2009). Therefore, it is necessary to conduct more empirical research about authentic online experiences of teachers working with young learners to better understand these teachers’ specific needs for PD activities and to develop more relevant training programmes.

Positioning Theory (Harré & van Langenhove, 1999) offers a valuable theoretical framework to examine the PD needs of teachers as it focuses on individuals' beliefs within social interactions and how these beliefs influence their actions. Adopting Positioning Theory as the theoretical framework, this study collected data from semi-structured interviews with teachers working in different primary schools in Vietnam. The aim was to examine the PD needs of primary school language teachers in online teaching contexts and how they identify these needs through reflexive and interactive positionings. The two research questions are as follows: (1) What professional development needs are perceived by primary school English teachers in online settings? and (2) How do teachers' reflexive and interactive positionings influence their PD needs?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Teacher professional development

This study adopts the view that teacher professional development (PD) is, at its core, a process of learning through participation in activities that enhance their knowledge, skills and expertise (OECD, 2013); and applying what teachers have learned into their teaching practices to facilitate students' learning (Avalos, 2011). Learning, from a social constructivist perspective, is inherently situated in specific social contexts, where individuals actively construct knowledge by interacting with others and making sense of their experiences (Vygotsky & Kozulin, 1989, as cited in Schreiber & Valle, 2013; Spigner-Littles & Anderson, 1999). In the context of teacher learning, teachers could identify their PD needs through interaction with members in their schools and communities. However, as the elements within a professional community are not static, teachers' PD needs may change over time. In other words, teachers' knowledge, skills and expertise must be continuously expanded to enable them to adapt to changes in their working environments. That explains why PD should be viewed as a continuous process (Desimone, 2009; Kabilan & Veratharaju, 2013). In addition, teachers' PD is considered effective when the PD work is

tailored to their different needs (Darling-Hammond et al., 2009); then, it is essential to identify teachers' PD needs regularly.

Online learning

Online learning is defined as the instructional process that takes place through digital platforms, which enables virtual interaction between teachers and students (Al-Kumaim et al., 2021a). Previous studies have adopted other terms such as online education, remote learning or virtual learning as synonyms for online learning (Quadri et al., 2017). Although online learning has been implemented in education for some time, with the whole course delivered either partially or fully online (Means et al., 2009), a wholly online mode with no physical classrooms first emerged as a widespread practice during the COVID-19 outbreak. Online learning is typically categorised into synchronous and asynchronous formats (Hrastinski, 2008), and each entails distinct modes of teacher-student interaction. Synchronous learning typically makes use of technological platforms to facilitate real-time interaction between teachers and students when they are in different physical locations. In contrast, asynchronous online learning does not occur in real time; instead, learners access materials and complete exercises at their own pace.

Teachers' professional development needs in the online contexts

The emergence of wholly online teaching and learning has compelled teachers to develop a range of pedagogical knowledge and instructional strategies that are different from those used in in-person courses (König et al., 2020). In traditional classrooms, teachers rely heavily on in-person interactions, physical classroom management and face-to-face communication to engage students and support their learning. They draw on direct observations to evaluate student understanding and adjust instruction accordingly. However, the shift in instructional mode to wholly online renders many activities employed in traditional classes no longer applicable.

In Vietnam and other Asian countries, previous studies report several challenges that primary school teachers encountered. For instance, Dao et al. (2024) highlighted difficulties of teachers in promoting students' engagement and maintaining their attention during lessons. The task of managing pupils became more challenging when teachers could not see them in person (Tran & Pham, 2021; Wang et al., 2021). As the pupils are energetic learners with a short attention span (Hughes, 1986, as cited in Uysal & Yauz, 2015), a great deal of effort is required from primary school teachers. Wang et al.'s (2021) research reported on primary school EFL teachers' concerns about their massive amount of talking time spent on explaining, due to their belief that students could not understand the concepts by self-teaching. Teachers needed to design engaging content that worked well in a virtual format and provided opportunities for meaningful online interaction without the physical presence and cues that were found in traditional classrooms (Moore, 2013). However, teachers were found to lack sufficient pedagogical and technological knowledge to use technology to teach the English language to young learners (Taghizadeh & Hasani Yourshahi, 2019). In addition, limited interaction between teachers and students during online classes required teachers to spend more time to communicate with students before and after lessons (Wang et al., 2021). Some teachers even experienced self-doubt regarding their professional competence in the online contexts (Wang et al., 2021).

Research on primary school teachers' PD needs has identified the need for effective integration of technologies into online classes to support content delivery and instructional strategies (Lu & Han, 2022; Taghizadeh & Hasani Yourdshahi, 2019; Wang et al., 2021; Wong & Moorhouse, 2021). Another reported need of these teachers is to improve interactional competence (Cheung, 2021; Wang, 2021; Wong & Moorhouse, 2021) such as how to effectively integrate verbal and non-verbal responses to best provide learning opportunities for the pupils (teacher – student interaction) or how to enhance peer collaboration among pupils (student – student interaction). As young

learners need significant support from parents (Tao & Xu, 2022; Wang, 2021), teacher – parent interaction is a key factor in promoting students' learning. However, relatively limited attention has been placed on the teachers' PD need for technological integration strategies to personalise learning activities and strategies to better teachers' communication with students' parents. Teachers' perceptions of themselves, their students and students' parents in interpreting their experiences and constructing PD needs. Thus, this study aims to examine the PD needs of primary school language teachers in online teaching contexts and how they identify these needs through reflexive and interactive positionings.

Theoretical Framework

This study aimed to investigate the PD needs of language primary school teachers in the context of online teaching and how these needs are identified through social interactions. Teacher PD is conceptualised as a learning process shaped by teachers' interactions with various contextual factors within their educational settings, such as learner characteristics, parental involvement or school assessment regulations. Teachers also hold particular perceptions about their roles, their learners and other elements in the context of online teaching, which in turn significantly influence how they interact with learners, parents and how they teach. Such perceptions and interactions can inform how teachers identify their PD needs. Thus, Positioning Theory (Harré & van Langenhove, 1999) would be a useful lens as it allows analysis of how teachers assign certain sets of rights, duties and/ or obligations to themselves (reflexive positioning), and to others or being assigned by others (interactive positioning) in their interactions. These sets, or the so-called positions, are believed to demonstrate the changing nature of social interactions and reflect their “beliefs with respect to the rights and duties of the members of a group of people to act in certain ways” (Harré, 2012, as cited in Kayı-Aydar, 2019, p.153). While reflexive positioning informs how teacher identify their PD needs on a particular personal stance, interactive positioning highlights how teachers identify their PD needs

in relation to other groups of people in their context such as students, parents or colleagues. Throughout their interactions, teachers may choose to retain initial beliefs about themselves and their students (first order positioning) or make positioning moves (repositioning) to accept their interactively assigned positions or deliberately form new positions (deliberate positioning). Throughout these processes, teachers may question their existing competencies and decide on new knowledge or skills to learn to better perform their new positions (Kayı-Aydar, 2019). This view lends support to Schon's (as cited in Tran & Pasura, 2018) argument that professional growth is viewed as a dialectical process that is linked to actions.

THE STUDY

To answer the research questions, a qualitative case study (Yin, 2014) was adopted as it enabled the investigation of how teachers identify their PD needs through the interplay between their perceptions and external factors in local contexts. It allowed researchers to “conduct the study in a natural setting” to “explore a social or human problem” (Creswell, 2014, p. 205).

The participants

Purposive sampling was adopted to recruit primary school English teachers who were responsible for conducting wholly online courses at times of COVID-19 pandemic although they were generally unfamiliar with online teaching prior to that period. The participants involved five primary school teachers from two cities in Southern Vietnam. All participants were female and held a bachelor's degree in TESOL Studies, with teaching experience ranging from 4 to 8 years. Four teachers were teaching in public schools in Ho Chi Minh city while the remaining one was from a private school in Bien Hoa City. It is important to notice that these public and private schools followed the same training curriculum issued by The Ministry of Education and Training, and the teaching

conditions across the two cities were relatively comparable. For the sake of participants' confidentiality, their names and institutes were kept anonymous.

Data collection and analysis

Semi-structured interviews were used to understand how English teachers in primary schools experienced online teaching and identified their PD needs through their reflexive and interactive positioning. The interview questions focused on teachers' perceptions of their roles and students; their interactions with students and students' parents; their teaching practices in online courses; and challenges they encountered. Participants were also invited to share their perceptions of knowledge and skills essential for effective online teaching; reflect on their previous PD experiences and to talk about their preferences for future PD programmes. The interviews were conducted in the mother tongue of the participants, Vietnamese. Each interview last between 30 and 40 minutes and was recorded, then transcribed verbatim.

Data generated from the interviews were analysed with an employment of thematic analysis (Braun & Clark, 2006) to find emergent themes. The first step was to transcribe all the interview recordings word-for-word, followed by researchers listening to the recordings and reading the transcripts several times to gain a general understanding of the data. Next, first dataset was coded with the integration of First Cycle Coding methods such as *in vivo*, descriptive, values and process coding (Saldaña, 2016). Examples of initial codes were "head-to-head competition", "misleading visual indicators", "commitment to supporting weak students", and "adapting instruction to learner differences". These codes were then reviewed and revised to remove overlaps. This coding procedure was conducted with the remaining sets of transcripts. After that, all codes were compared across the participants and grouped into larger themes. For instance, codes such as "understanding psychological readiness", "recognising physical constraints" and "interpreting behavioural responses/ preferences" were grouped into "Understanding the pupils".

FINDINGS

The qualitative data from the interviews were analysed with reference to Positioning Theory's concepts of reflexive and interactive positioning in order to examine the primary school language teachers' professional development needs in the online teaching context. As the five teachers' positions are indicative of their responses to unfamiliar pedagogical challenges, the identification of teachers' professional needs was described and discussed in relation to these positions. The findings revealed that the teachers expressed a need for more PD work related to understanding of the pupils, professional responsibility and effective teacher – parent communication.

Teacher Professional Development Needs: Understanding of the pupils

Primary school English teachers' responses on the identification of their PD needs in online teaching contexts expressed an agreement on the importance of learning about psychological, physical and behavioural characteristics of these pupils. They considered the understanding of children as a starting point to provide effective teaching activities that facilitated their learning, as illustrated in comment from Teacher 2:

"I didn't expect my students to treat online learning just as a formality. I notice that teachers need to "play tricks" on the children in response to their unpredictable acts. Just like a head-to-head competition. Then, we need to understand them".

In her self-positioning, the teacher reflexively positioned herself as a learner learning about pupils' psychology and its relation to their behaviour or performance in synchronous sessions. In this online context, forces generated from students require teachers to question their existing beliefs, start to observe and learn new knowledge or skills. This teacher's experiences confirm the dynamic and relational nature of teaching process, meaning that it is not static. It is teachers' repositioning in Positioning Theory, which refers to an individual "adopts a new position as a result of previous experiences and interaction" (Harré &

van Langehove, 1999). Thus, repositioning act of teachers explains how they might redefine their ways of thinking and acting as a result of exposure to young learners in the online space. Further information was added by a teacher, who stated, *“I have used online teaching applications and created online games; some children got excited, but some children felt tired when looking at the screen for a long time, so they did not really enjoy it.”* (Teacher 3). Teacher 1 also shared:

“In the beginning, many people said that Grade - 1 students were too young to study online as they could not stay concentrated in online lessons. But I think that it is not an issue, if we know about the concentration span of the pupils, and organize activities to stimulate their learning spirit, there will be not much difference compared to face-to-face learning”.

Two teachers acknowledged that understanding students’ psychological and physical characteristics could improve students’ level of engagement in class activities and consequently, the learning quality. They also positioned their students as those who could be inspired and motivated to actively participate in learning activities while the key to successfully generate sources of inspiration for students was teacher’s understanding of the pupils.

Additionally, teachers’ desire to learn more about students’ behavioural aspect was reported. Their observation of the pupils’ performance in synchronous classes lead to false conclusion as the hints were not obvious as in the face-to-face mode. One of the teachers was stressed to say:

“My difficulty was that I didn’t fully grasp whether a child was concentrating on the lesson or not. For example, when I saw a boy sitting very nicely, starring at the screen, I thought, oh, it’s good for him to stay focused like that. But it turned out that he was browsing a website or playing games on the computer. It seems that students’ attention to the screen does not indicate their attention to the lesson. So, for me, it is a tough challenge”.
(Teacher 4)

Challenges in online modules such as interpretation of students' behaviour in video conference sessions or tracking students' concentration level confused the interviewed teachers. Some of them expressed their confidence in controlling pupils' learning at the beginning of the course; but then got embarrassed with the mismatch between what students showed to teachers and what actually happened. Indicators that could tell teachers whether students were in a focus mode did not always work in virtual classes and they started to notice the differences between meanings of students' behaviour in online meetings and traditional classrooms. However, they admitted that the issue was not completely solved, indicating that the teachers still struggled. Although they were aware of situations, proper solutions were not figured out. It can be inferred that new experiences with pupils' behaviour triggered these teachers to reposition themselves as learners.

Teacher Professional Development Needs: Professional Responsibility

Another theme emerged from the data is that teachers expressed a great deal of concern about addressing pupils' needs to make online learning engaging and effective. These needs of young learners could be in collective or individual manner, depending on whether teachers viewed the pupils as a group or a single student. While the pupils in the same grade were considered as a group with learning preferences different from those in another grade, they were also treated as individuals with distinct characteristics. Therefore, the position the teachers often took was to provide their students with personalised learning which motivated each of them to master the same knowledge and skills in their own way. In this instance, it is suggested that the teachers positioned themselves and simultaneously positioned others, their students, to be precise (Harré & van Langenhove, 1999). This interactive positioning process challenged their current pedagogical practices, triggered their thinking and finally a need for professional development appeared. They were curious about effective instructional strategies and technology integration in virtual classes to serve the function of personalise students' learning.

With regard to the issue of instructional strategies, the teachers were in need of exploring different methods that could inspire most students in a class to learn although this effort could increase teachers' workload. The following comment from Teacher 1 supports this view.

“For students at Grade 1, I did not have any difficulties because the children were very excited about participating in dances or movement activities when learning online. However, with Grade-3 children, they were a bit more mature and no longer interested in such activities. Nevertheless, the kids were interested in issues like what was happening on Tiktok, what was the hot trend, their idols, etc.; therefore, I did not let them participate in dancing activities anymore but sit down and talk to them about the above issues, and they got really excited. I thought that they were starting to grow up, so I couldn't apply a same method for different learners”.

This teacher focussed her attention on addressing young learners' needs which were not obvious to recognize and to deal with in the online space compared to the setting of face-to-face classes. All teachers admitted that they struggled to figure out appropriate instructional strategies for different groups of learners. In the early stage of online teaching, most teachers sought to replicate traditional face-to-face instruction, aiming to achieve comparable learning outcomes. However, they failed and started to explore alternative strategies that better aligned their teaching with students' needs. Therefore, it can be argued that teachers' recognition of their PD needs stemmed from reflexive and interactive repositioning. Teachers positioned themselves as facilitators for personalised learning can essentially mean that they positioned young learners as the main concern, rather than focusing exclusively on teaching the curriculum content.

Another PD need under the position of teachers as facilitators for personalized learning was to take advantage of technology. Surprisingly, all the participants considered themselves technologically competent,

suggesting that they did not have much trouble with the design and functions of tools to search information, present lecture notes or organize online games. Instead, they struggled with how to apply these tools in their online classes. One of the interviewees was stressed to say:

“In the beginning, I used the technological tools employed in offline classes for online ones, but then found it inappropriate because the pupils seemed as not interested as in traditional classroom activities. And, I also had difficulties with organizing online games for large classes with 40 to 50 children. It was quite time-consuming while my expectations were not satisfied. I think that the existing applications do not meet my teaching requirements”. (Teacher 3)

All participants agreed that there were a large number of online workshops and training sessions introduced to teachers before and during the semester to support them with technological aspects of delivering an online lesson. However, most of the teachers did not find these packages useful for or relevant to their own practice, indicating that only a few of their needs were addressed. Some teachers expressed the need for more contextualised training programmes as in their schools, the lack of technological tools was seen as a major barrier to ensure the teaching quality.

The final need emerged from the position of teachers as facilitators for personalised learning was teachers’ desire to support at-risk students. All teachers mentioned difficulties in tracking weak students’ learning since they were not able to approach these students as they usually did in in-person sessions. A teacher stated:

“The thing that bothered me the most was how I took care of my weak students. If it had been in face – to – face classes, I could have come to my students, and corrected their exercises, but I couldn’t do it when I taught online because it was time-consuming and might affect other students. Actually, I still have not fully solved it yet”. (Teacher 3)

In light of Positioning Theory (Harré & van Langehove, 1999), this teacher's storyline positioned at-risk students as individuals who required greater instructional effort to meet their learning needs. The need to be exposed to training materials or sessions that dealt with both instructional strategies and technological tools to keep these students in the right track was demonstrated.

Teacher Professional Development Needs: Effective Communication

Analysis of the data suggests that most teachers identified strategies to communicate with students' parents as a PD need, particularly as they got involved in more interaction with students' parents. In on-campus traditional learning mode, although teachers also met with parents when necessary, face-to-face conversations were preferred, as they teachers could describe the situations in detail and discuss relevant issues with sufficient amount of attention from the parents. However, in online space, the only mean for teacher – parent communication was using phones for calls, messages or announcements either privately or via a social networking group. Since teachers needed to frequently contact the parents to talk about generally negative topics such as students' absence in class, unexpected behaviour or missed assignments, miscommunication occurred, and the parents occasionally reacted in an aggressive manner. Teacher 2 shared her story as follows.

“My child and I are under too much pressure”, said a student's parent. I just wanted to keep an eye on the kids. When I posted a list of children who had not done their homework, some parents agreed with the list and reminded their children to do their homework, but there were also parents saying, “You would embarrass my child with those words. She feels pressured because she is asked for homework submission all times” – “I feel like my child is going to be depressed after this online class”. While the pupils were too lazy to do homework. Not all parents were cooperative. There were parents who raised their voices, “I'd rather let my child drop out this year than cram them with thousand things. I don't need these. What's important now is my child's health.” Parents put pressure on teachers.

Despite an effort to search for more parental support and engagement in students' learning, this teacher failed to deliver a right message to the parents. This teacher's experiences of communication failure served as a source for her learning as they brought a sense of dissatisfaction and even embarrassment. She expected to build a positive relationship with students' parents to attain the ultimate goal of bettering student's learning in the online space, when they were at home. However, a breakdown in communication challenged but also encouraged her to reflect. One possible explanation for this situation is the misunderstanding in their communication, while the participant teachers believed that learners at young age were capable of developing the English language competency in the online space, the parent considered English as an unimportant subject and showed their indifference towards their child's learning. The teacher's storyline suggests that she positioned the parents and simultaneously was positioned as a source of pressure, an interactive positioning process. These emerged positionings could be viewed as teachers' reaction to current contexts; in other words, it can be argued that teachers' identification of their learning needs is context-driven, and their perception of effective teaching includes good communication skills.

The interviewed teachers expressed their needs for more PD activities that addressed the issue of communicating with students' parents as they agreed on the vital role of parents. One teacher commented:

"I realize that the student capacity is connected to the amount of parental regard. A weak child in school means that parents are detaching themselves from their child's schooling. Even if I called to ask, the parents did not cooperate. Many parents blocked my phone number because I called too much. Sometimes I had to witness parents yelling at their children through the phone. [...] If I call parents more, I'm afraid the students will hold an antipathy against me. I'm confused." (Teacher 4)

These teachers' acknowledgement of parents' involvement in assisting primary school children during online courses rooted from the children's difficulties such as technological problems, lack of interest or short attention span. A sudden change to the online mode without sufficient preparation caused stress to teachers as they were not well equipped with necessary skills to deal with increasing frequency of interacting with students' parents.

DISCUSSION

The aim of this study is to identify primary school language teachers' PD needs in the online contexts, with reference to their positioning of themselves, their students and students' parents. With the employment of Positioning Theory, three categories named understanding of the pupils, professional responsibility and effective communication were classified as teachers' needs for professional development. These findings highlight several key considerations for designing professional development activities.

Learning about the psychological, physical and behavioural aspects of learners is of great concern for the teachers in developing their teaching career. The emergence of conducting online classes for young learners with little preparation in advance requires primary school teachers to question the efficacy of their own teaching philosophies and principles. In line with previous studies (Le et al., 2022; Wang et al., 2021), all teachers claimed that the expansion of teachers' roles as well as diversification of students' performances in the online environment compelled them to engage in ongoing learning. Teachers considered understanding of students' characteristics as a starting point and self-positioned themselves as willing learners. In their storyline, the interviewed teachers not only positioned themselves but also positioned others, meaning that they got involved in the interactive positioning process (Harré & van Langenhove, 1999). Additionally, their repositioning reflects an interaction between a self-understanding of the professional beliefs of effective teaching and practices in the

educational contexts. This close association was reported in other studies which demonstrate how the contextual settings and teaching processes are relational in nature, which triggers teachers to re-examine their traditional pedagogic practices and beliefs towards being a teacher (Tran & Nguyen, 2015).

It was the interplay of contextual and pedagogical factors that contributed to the shift in their position from teachers to learners, a reflexive positioning of self in context (Harré & van Langenhove, 1999), as one of their PD needs. This decision can be considered as a dynamic response to the current changes they experienced in the new mode of teaching and learning, the wholly online mode to be precise. Therefore, it can be argued that teachers' identification of PD needs is situated and relational as they try to adjust their instructional practices in response to changes in operating settings. Teachers' acknowledgement of their learning to understand more about the students in online space suggests some gaps in teacher training programmes which may lead to teachers' sense of unpreparedness for online teaching during the shut-down period. This is congruent with Wang et al.'s (2021) finding that teachers are not prepared enough for the implementation of online learning. Although courses related general characteristics of learners are included in the curriculum of teacher training, those about learners' behaviour or performance in online settings, especially pupils at primary schools, may not be sufficient to provide pre-service teachers with relevant experiences. This helps explain for why teachers presented themselves as struggling to understand their students. It can be inferred that their desire to learn and better their understanding of students' characteristics indicates that teacher PD needs are not fixed (Tran & Pasura, 2018), and training relevant to students' psychology in the virtual space may have the potential to influence the effectiveness of course delivery and practice.

Another finding is that teachers perceived their professional responsibility as a facilitator for personalised learning which encourages them to search for appropriate instructional strategies and technology employment.

After some trials and errors, some adjust their instructional skills or methods of exploiting technological tools to align with students' needs. It suggests that the primary school language teachers first tried to use their own experience to deal with unfamiliar pedagogical challenges, followed by a desire for adaptation to facilitate individual learning in new contexts. This need was identified through the act of agential self-positioning (Harré & van Langenhove, 1999). To be specific, teachers demonstrated their critical reflection and ability to judge the appropriateness of teaching – learning activities for necessary changes in instructional strategies or course content. This finding is highly relevant to a claim by Tran and Pasura (2018) that deliberate positioning is of great importance to the continuity of professional learning and the shaping of teachers' agency. Additionally, all the participants evaluated themselves as technologically competent teachers, meaning that they did not have much trouble with the design and functions of tools to search information, present lecture notes or organize online games. This finding challenges a conclusion of previous research that teachers face different difficulties with employing technologies in their teaching practices. Teachers' effort to support individual learning indicates a need for more contextualised training programmes (Darling-Hammond et al., 2009; Nguyen & Nguyen, 2019). The unavailability of sessions on the use of technological tools for specific purposes or particular groups of learners was seen as a major hindrance to ensure the teaching quality. One possible reason could be that the existing pedagogical toolkit introduced in teacher training programmes may fail to equip teachers with strategies or techniques to address students' needs in the online space. This echoed Moore-Adams et al.'s (2016) finding that the content of teacher training curriculum includes types of knowledge and skills that are similar to those of face-to-face teaching. Therefore, these PD sessions are not significantly beneficial to the teachers and indirectly lead to teachers' insufficient experiences and pedagogical knowledge about online teaching. In order to improve the effectiveness of PD activities, teachers' voices should be collected and considered

as an important element in designing and delivering these sessions to them. As suggested by a number of studies (Kabilan & Veratharaju, 2013; Wells, 2014), one of the essential components in effective PD for teachers is they have the opportunity to actively participate in the change process.

With regard to teachers' need relevant to their communication skills, the finding indicates that teachers face several challenges in communicating with students' parents through technology-mediated channels to increase parental support and engagement in students' learning. The teachers' storyline suggest that they got involved in an interactive positioning process (Harré & van Langenhove, 1999) as they positioned students' parents and simultaneously was positioned as a source of pressure. Importantly, previous studies showed an agreement that young learners needed a great deal of parental support in their learning as the pupils were too young to deal with technological issues and even to regulate their learning at home without teachers' supervision (Cheung, 2021; Lau & Lee, 2020; Zhang et al., 2020). However, although teachers in the current study agreed on the importance and necessity of parental assistance, their inability to adopt proper communication strategies was recorded. This finding lends support to a number of studies (Lipscomb, 2015; Palts & Harro-Loit, 2015; Simons-Morton & Chen, 2009). One possible explanation for this issue is that teacher training programmes typically concentrate on student teachers' mastery of teacher – student communication while neglecting the part of interaction with parents, colleagues or community members. Despite the complex nature of communicating with these diverse audiences, teacher education programmes have not properly included modules about communication instruction to the curriculum (Dotger, 2010; Miretzky, 2004; Shartrand et al., 1997) to adequately prepare teachers for practices. Therefore, what should be added to teacher training sessions or teacher preparation programmes is the type of communication that best suits the teacher – parent relationship to make it beneficial to the pupils' learning (Gisewilte et al., 2019).

CONCLUSION

This study contributes to the understanding of primary school EFL teachers' PD needs in relation to teachers' reflexive and interactive positionings in the storylines about their practical experiences with online classes. In conclusion, teachers teaching the English language to pupils in the online environment expressed their professional needs as (a) learning about students' characteristics, (b) facilitating personalised learning and (c) communicating with students' parents. Specifically, these teachers highlighted challenges in interpreting young learners' behaviour during the lessons due to the discrepancies between teachers' thoughts and students' actual activities. Meanwhile, despite their profound knowledge of psychological and physical aspects of students, the teachers still struggled with how to make learning activities aligned with these traits in order to engage students. Another reported concern was with instructional strategies and technology use to address different needs of students. Last, teachers also expressed a need to improve their communication skills for a better relationship with students' parents as they wished to have more parental involvement in supporting students' learning at home.

These findings can serve as a reference for the establishment of comprehensive PD programmes. First, PD activities should be practical and relevant to teachers' needs. It would be meaningful if teachers are provided chances to partake in experiential learning modules to address specific issues that they experienced or might experience in their context. Since solutions for the same problem can be different when groups of learners change, the training content should be sensitive to factors influential to teachers' practices such as class size, students' background and characteristics. Thus, no single PD model is applicable for every group of teachers. In order to figure out and effectively address teachers' needs, their voices should be considered when the organizers plan a PD course. Various channels such as surveys, formal and informal meetings can be used to gather teachers' opinions. This stage might be best conducted at school level since it is essential to satisfy both teachers' needs and schools' requirements. Therefore, school support

for teachers' PD work is of great importance. Moreover, educators at teacher preparation institutions should also be aware of the PD needs of in-service teachers so that they can make appropriate adjustments to the training curriculum to equip pre-service teachers with necessary knowledge and skills. In short, the current study has attempted to emphasize the necessity to consider contexts, teachers' voices as well as the shared responsibility of schools and teacher training institutions in the implementation of PD activities.

Some limitations of the current research are presented as follows. As the study is conducted in the south of Vietnam, the results might not provide enough evidence to advance generalizations to contexts with different sociocultural backgrounds. Moreover, most of the data collected in this study are from the perspective of teachers; thus, the findings could partially reflect the issue. Since teaching process is relational, a deeper exploration of the perceptions of other stakeholders could better examine the impacts of different factors on primary school EFL teachers' development and the interactions among these factors. First, students' experiences with learning activities in the interviewed teachers' online sessions and their expectations could add more valuable details to the aspects of learners' characteristics and specific learning needs. Additionally, voices of the school academic managers should be collected to further investigate teachers' professional responsibility and feasibility of the recommended PD activities. Therefore, future studies are encouraged to collect opinions of these informants for a deeper insight into teachers' PD.

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