



EFL teachers' professional development experiences in a Vietnamese university: An exploratory study

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Abstract

Professional development (PD) plays an important role in enhancing teachers' expertise, professional identity, and classroom practice. In recent years, the Vietnamese government has invested in PD to develop EFL teachers' capacity, aiming to improve the quality of English language teaching and learning. Therefore, ensuring the effectiveness of PD is essential for maintaining accountability. Our paper investigates EFL teachers' PD experiences in the Vietnamese tertiary education context. Drawing on semi-structured interviews with seven EFL teachers from a Vietnamese university in Hanoi, this paper identifies characteristics of PD that contributed positively to their experiences and those that discouraged them from participating in PD activities. Our study contextualises Desimone and Garet's (2015) five characteristics of an effective teacher PD framework, which are content focus, active learning, coherence, sustained duration, and collective participation. We found that teachers benefited from interacting with peers from different contexts. We also found that while teachers value sustained ongoing PD activities, these were hindered by work commitments, family commitments, and financial considerations. Our paper offers a set of key considerations for designing and organising PD activities in Vietnam.

Keywords: Professional development policy; teacher learning, teacher professional development; teacher professional development experience; Vietnamese English as a Foreign language (EFL) teachers

Introduction

The importance of quality teacher professional development (PD) is widely accepted. It can enhance teachers' pedagogical knowledge, inform classroom practice, nurture professional identity, and improve students' learning experiences. Consequently, in the context of higher

education, universities and governments have invested time and money in teacher PD. To ensure that the goals are met, investigating teachers' experience participating in PD activities is necessary. Our study explores the PD experiences of teachers from an English department in a public university in Vietnam, focusing on the opportunities and challenges they identified. Studying the PD context in Vietnam can inform efforts to improve teacher PD practices in Vietnam and countries where resources are limited.

As our paper focuses on teachers who teach English at the university level, we begin by discussing the role of the English language in Vietnam and the Vietnamese government's efforts to improve the quality of teaching and learning of English in the country. Next, we review previous research related to teachers' experiences of participating in PD. Subsequently, we describe our research methodology. In the following sections, we discuss the teachers' PD experiences in terms of factors that encourage or dissuade them from participating in PD activities through the lens of Desimone and Garet's (2015) effective teacher PD framework. Our paper contributes to the PD literature by offering a set of key considerations for designing and organising PD activities in Vietnam.

Background of the Study

Teacher PD in Vietnam, particularly in English language teaching and learning, has been motivated by socio-political visions of the country. As English is a lingua franca among ASEAN countries, Vietnamese leaders' ability to use the language effectively allows them to participate in the region economically and politically (Nguyen et al., 2018). Locally, efforts to raise the quality of teaching and learning English are driven by the government's goal of meeting future employment needs. To raise the standard of English in Vietnam, the Vietnamese government has prioritised English language teaching and learning in the national education reforms by focusing on teacher PD (Dang, 2021; Duong, 2021; Le et al., 2022). A goal of the Government of Vietnam (2008) is for most Vietnamese who have completed secondary and tertiary education to be able to communicate confidently in English in multilingual and multicultural environments by 2020. The government identified three goals for language teachers' PD: to enhance their English language proficiency, pedagogical skills, and skill at integrating technology in language teaching and learning (Government of Vietnam, 2017).

In the context of English language education in higher education, Vietnamese universities are required to focus on training highly qualified teaching staff, fostering student-directed learning and creativity, and developing training programs for teachers and education leaders to promote socio-economic development and international integration. For example, the Government of Vietnam's (2013) education reforms stated that university teaching staff members (including EFL teachers) are required to hold at least a master's degree and to be trained in pedagogical knowledge and skills. To promote ongoing teacher PD, domestic and international experts were subsequently invited to run PD activities for local teaching staff. While we agree with Ngo et al. (2022) that the success of PD for EFL teachers in Vietnamese higher education is dependent on teachers' individual motivation and responsibility, we believe that it is also influenced by context. Our study aims to understand these contextual elements, which can impact teachers' participation in PD.

Teachers' Experience Participating in PD Activities

Teacher professional development refers to "structured professional learning that results in changes to teacher knowledge and practices, and improvements in student learning outcomes" (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017, p. 2). The goals of teacher PD, both formal and informal, include enhancing teachers' skills and knowledge, and developing teacher professional identity

(Mathews, 2025; Mockler, 2011; Postholm, 2012). Teacher PD activities include attending seminars, presenting at conferences, reading professional literature, reflecting on teaching experiences, and discussing classroom issues with colleagues. Studies in teacher PD have investigated a range of issues, including learning needs of teachers (Karlberg & Bezzina, 2022), the role of technology in teacher PD (Coker, 2021), teacher-directed PD (Mushayikwa, 2013), teachers' evaluation of their learning experiences (Sapkota et al., 2024), effectiveness of PD activities (Zimmer & Matthews, 2022), and teacher PD policies (Desimone & Sajjadi, 2025).

In Vietnam, teachers' PD experiences have been a topic of interest in local research. In a review of 28 theses on the topic of teacher PD produced in Vietnam, three out of four themes identified are related to teachers' experiences participating in PD, namely teachers' satisfaction with their PD, their expectations regarding PD, and factors that discouraged them from participating in PD (Le & Le, 2022). The remainder of this literature review, therefore, focuses on factors that encourage teachers to participate in PD and those that prevent them.

PD topics that are relevant to teachers' needs and interests can have a positive impact on their PD experiences. Topics that are current and relevant to teachers' career stage can encourage learning enthusiasm (Avidov-Ungar & Herscu, 2020; Ngo et al., 2022). To ensure that teachers' needs are met, they can be given autonomy to plan and implement their PD (Geldenhuijs & Oosthuizen, 2015). Inviting expert presenters (Geldenhuijs & Oosthuizen, 2015; Hubers et al., 2022; Rhodes & Beneicke, 2002) to deliver the PD can result in an in-depth discussion of a given topic. As the selection of PD topics plays a crucial role in teacher PD experiences, the mismatch between the PD content and teachers' professional needs can discourage them from participating in PD (Geldenhuijs & Oosthuizen, 2015; Rhodes & Beneicke, 2002). In Vietnam, this mismatch is sometimes attributed to top-down national requirements and inappropriate institutional policies (Moore et al., 2023; Ngo et al., 2022). One recent evaluation of PD in the Vietnamese context commented that the one-size-fits-all approach to PD is unhelpful because it was unable to meet the diversity of teachers' professional needs and interests (Le & Le, 2022). PD programs that fail to meet teachers' needs are regarded as an additional burden and meaningless compliance-driven activities (Koay, 2023; Liu, 2012). Our study examines the extent to which PD content influences Vietnamese teachers' PD experiences.

Teachers value collaboration and communication in PD activities. Such activities (e.g., small group discussions) allow teachers to share new ideas and challenges, learn from each other's expertise, and reflect on their practices (Dickerson et al., 2014; Geldenhuijs & Oosthuizen, 2015; Hubers et al., 2022). In the Vietnamese context, Duong (2021) reported that sharing classroom experiences with colleagues was a preferred PD activity due to its collegial environment. In another study involving 12 EFL teachers in various stages of their careers and four academic managers in a Vietnamese university, collaborative work, such as peer support groups and professional learning communities, has been reported to facilitate teachers' engagement in PD (Ngo et al., 2022). To further understand the current PD situation in the Vietnamese higher education context, we investigate teachers' experiences in collaborating and interacting with peers.

A factor that discourages teachers from participating in PD activities is time constraints due to teaching workload and life commitments (Hung & Thuy, 2021; Nguyen et al., 2023; Rhodes & Beneicke, 2002; Teräs, 2016). In the Vietnamese context, financial constraints and resource allocations have been reported to restrain the implementation and maintenance of professional learning communities (Huynh & Nguyen, 2025). In some cultures, marital status can affect teachers' participation in PD (Dayoub & Bashiruddin, 2012). In the Vietnamese context, female teachers' traditional gender roles have been reported to prevent them from participating in PD (Ngo et al., 2022). Similarly, in most African societies, female teachers,

particularly married ones, split their time between domestic activities and work responsibilities (Salifu et al., 2024).

To address this issue, PD options need to consider these constraints when planning PD. The possible options are engaging in online PD activities, mentoring, and reflective practices. Online platforms, such as Facebook groups, allow teachers to meet others who share common professional interests (Bett & Makewa, 2020). Drawing on semi-structured interviews with 19 EFL teachers in Vietnam, Truong and Murray (2019) found that online PD can promote teacher autonomy, allowing them to manage their own learning pace. Other advantages of online PD reported by the teachers in the study were reasonable costs, sufficiently challenging content, reasonable timing, and minimal assessment pressure. In an analysis of 1479 posts on a professional development Facebook group for Vietnamese EFL teachers, the most common posts (63%) were related to technology tools, followed by classroom management (13%) (Ngo & Nguyen, 2023). The second option is engaging in mentoring programs. For these programs to be effective, establishing trust between mentors and mentees is essential (Irby et al., 2017), but this takes time to develop. In the Vietnamese context, Nguyen (2016) reported that early-career EFL teachers valued peer feedback and that mutual understanding between mentor and mentee was essential for effective mentoring. The third option is teacher reflection (Rhodes & Beneicke, 2002). As well as allowing teachers to develop a richer understanding of their teaching philosophy and the principles that shape their professional practice (Farrell & Macapinlac, 2021), another advantage of reflective practices is that it may not require additional time. For example, teachers can reflect on their practices while completing domestic chores.

In the USA context, Desimone and Garet (2015, p. 253) posit five characteristics of effective teacher PD.

- Content focus: Activities that are focused on subject matter content and how students learn that content
- Active learning: Opportunities for teachers to observe, receive feedback, analyse student work, or make presentations, as opposed to passively listening to lectures
- Coherence: Content, goals, and activities that are consistent with the school curriculum and goals, teacher knowledge and beliefs, the needs of students, and school, district, and state reforms and policies
- Sustained duration: PD activities that are ongoing throughout the school year
- Collective participation: Groups of teachers from the same grade, subject, or school participate in PD activities together to build an interactive learning community

As PD activities generally require a budget, designing and implementing effective learning activities, informed by teachers' PD experiences, is important. Previous research has investigated factors that influence teachers' participation in PD in a range of contexts. To contribute to our understanding of teacher PD in the Global South, this article identifies factors that encourage EFL teachers from a Vietnamese university to participate in PD and those that discourage them. Particularly in a developing country, where resources are limited, understanding these factors can help policy makers and managers to design more effective teacher PD programs that are contextually relevant, cost-effective, and capable of improving teaching quality and student learning outcomes. The questions that guided this study are:

1. Which aspects of PD activities do teachers value and why?
2. Which factors interfere with the effectiveness of teachers' PD activities and why?

Methodology

Data Collection

To investigate teachers’ experience of participating in PD activities, our study used semi-structured interviews. Using a set of pre-prepared interview questions enabled us to maintain the focus of the study while allowing flexibility to explore emerging issues (Dörnyei, 2007). Due to the synchronous nature of interviews, both interviewers and interviewees had the opportunity to seek clarification during the interview where necessary. For ethical considerations, the interviewer (first author) reminded the interviewees before the interviews were recorded that they did not have to disclose any information about their PD experiences if they believed it might jeopardise their career (Rolland et al., 2020). All the interviewees were informed that the data would be analysed by the first and second authors.

As interviews are co-constructed by interviewers and interviewees, efforts were made to reduce the power imbalance. As the second author works in the same department as the interviewees, all interviews in this study were conducted by the first author, who is a visiting lecturer (from Australia) at the university. He teaches twice a year in Vietnam on the Master of TESOL program, a transnational collaboration between this university and an Australian university. For each visit, the first author spent only one week in Vietnam and so was not directly connected to the interviewees professionally.

The interviewees consisted of seven teachers from the English department in a public university in Hanoi, Vietnam. We believe the number of participants is modest but appropriate considering the exploratory focus of our study. Also, as our study adopts a qualitative research approach, richness of data is prioritized over the amount of data for generalizability purposes (Dörnyei, 2007). For example, an exploratory study investigating teachers’ subjective experience participating in a knowledge-building community, only three teachers were interviewed (Chai & Merry, 2006). In terms of the recruitment process, after the project had been approved by the Dean of the English Department at the university, a poster was circulated by the department’s office. Those interested in participating in the research were asked to inform the second author by email. This process resulted in seven participants, who taught general English and English for academic purposes units. These units are offered to all students enrolled in the Bachelor of English Studies program. Two participants also taught other units. Khoa and Hien taught a linguistic unit and English language teaching methodology respectively. Four of the seven interviews were conducted face-to-face while the first author was in Vietnam, and three

Table 1. Interviewees’ background information

No.	Pseudonyms	Gender	Highest qualification attained	Years of university teaching experience
1	Diep	Female	Master of TESOL & FLT	3
2	Loc	Male	Master of Arts	6
3	Khoa	Male	Master of TESOL	9
4	Hanh	Female	Master of TESOL	10
5	Linh	Female	Master of TESOL	10
6	Duyen	Female	Master of Education (TESOL)	15
7	Hien	Female	Master of English Studies	18

teachers were interviewed via Zoom. The duration of each interview was around 45 minutes. All face-to-face interviews were audio recorded, and the Zoom interviews were video recorded. To protect the participant confidentiality, all interviewees were assigned a pseudonym. The interview questions are provided in the appendix.

During the interviews, the teachers were asked to describe their understanding of teacher PD before reporting on their experience participating in PD activities. Then they were asked to recall and describe PD experiences that they had found pleasant or unpleasant. The interviewees were also asked to provide their reason(s) for participating in PD activities and describe challenges that discouraged them from participating in such activities.

Data Analysis

Our study adopted a constructivist paradigm, understanding reality as subjective and socially constructed (Lincoln & Guba, 2013). This implies that we do not view information provided by our interviewers or our interpretation of the interviews as objective. We acknowledge that our interpretation is influenced by our sociocultural and sociohistorical lenses both individually and collectively. As an exploratory study, our goal is to investigate an under-explored research context, offering preliminary findings.

We used thematic analysis to identify patterns in our data. Firstly, we each listened to the recordings several times to familiarise ourselves with the content. Drawing on Braun and Clarke (2006), as we listened, we listed all possible themes that answered the research questions, guided by Desimone and Garet's (2015) framework. As a qualitative study, the themes were identified based on their prevalence in our data. Following Braun and Clarke (2006), prevalence was determined based on the number of occurrences of a particular theme in our data and its perceived importance in relation to the research questions. As an exploratory study, we have prioritized perceived importance when identifying the themes as our aim was to capture as many aspects of teachers' PD experiences as possible, rather than the typicality of the themes. Then, we met on Microsoft Teams to compare our themes (identified individually) and discuss discrepancies in our themes (Tallent et al., 2023). A consensus was reached between the authors by providing reasoning and questioning each other's interpretations. This process, allowing for research reflexivity, was also employed to ensure the trustworthiness of our analysis (Ahmed, 2024). Some themes were merged after the discussion. For example, 'seeking new PD experiences' and 'learning from colleagues' were later combined with 'active learning'. After we had agreed on the themes, relevant excerpts from the recordings were transcribed.

Positionality Statement

The authors are colleagues in the same department in a Vietnamese university. The first author is a visiting lecturer on a transnational postgraduate program jointly offered by the university and a university in Australia. The second author is a lecturer and the vice director of the program in Vietnam. As the second author is the manager of the participants, the interviews were conducted by the first author to mitigate potential 'bias'. However, a lack of rapport and trust between the first author and the interviewees may result in them withholding honest and detailed information on topics that they perceive to be sensitive (Roiha & Iikkanen, 2022). Despite our effort, we affirm that gathering objective or 'unbiased' interview data is impossible, as we understand interviews as a socially situated speech event (Karatsareas, 2022). In other words, what participants say in an interview may be influenced by their perception of interviewers' expectations and social dynamics. In terms of data analysis, the second author's familiarity with the interviewees may result in a 'biased' interpretation of the data but her familiarity with the research context can inform the interpretation process (Roiha & Iikkanen, 2022).

Findings

Our findings are presented according to Desimone and Garet's (2015) five characteristics of effective teacher PD: content focus, active learning, coherence, sustained duration, and collective participation.

Content Focus

All seven teachers in our study commented that the relevance of the topic discussed in PD sessions contributed to positive learning experiences. For example, Khoa, a teacher with nine years of tertiary teaching experience, reported he enjoyed an online course because he was passionate about the topic, and it was also relevant to a unit that he was teaching at the time, stating:

I joined an online course in linguistics... organised by... some professors in the US, and... I had to pay for the... course... I've learned a lot from that course. I think it was very useful for me... because... I could update my knowledge and... ask them... questions that I have been thinking a lot about... I think because of my love for the subject that I teach. I really care about.

The absence of pedagogical concerns in the interview data suggests that Khoa prioritized enhancing his subject matter knowledge over developing pedagogical expertise, possibly because of his confidence in his teaching skills (nine years).

Particularly useful for Khoa was the way the course allowed participants to enrol in topics of their choice.

There were many courses, but I did not join some courses because I was not really interested in the topics of certain courses... But I was really interested in technology for example.

PD activities that are driven by teachers' interests can promote teacher autonomy, having a positive effect on their participation and engagement.

While the relevance of content played an important role in promoting effective PD, our participants reported that characteristics of PD presenters could also have an impact on teachers' learning experiences. While studying for her master's degree, Hanh found that characteristics of the staff delivering the course positively impacted her engagement with the learning content.

I was inspired by the experienced lecturers. I have to say that they are very... enthusiastic and they brought me new knowledge.

For highly experienced and novice teachers alike, inviting PD speakers and facilitators who are likely to be respected by participants can enhance their learning experiences.

Active Learning

Opportunities to interact with facilitators and peers were also identified as a positive aspect of PD. In a less structured environment, teachers reported that asynchronous interaction on social media was a positive PD experience. An online forum for TESOL teachers on Facebook, for Diep, was particularly useful. She also regarded the diversity of teachers' experiences and views as opportunities for learning.

There're so many things I can learn from that group because the members are so active... They keep posting questions and sharing their own experiences every day... Although I don't share much in that group, I can learn a lot by reading the comments... and even a little bit of an argument because some of the members have contrasting ideas and from that kind of sharing I can learn too.

Teachers play an active role when deciding how they participate in asynchronous online environments. They may decide to share knowledge, provide group feedback, and/or critically engage with information on social media platforms. How they participate in the platforms may be influenced by their teaching experience. As Diep had relatively less tertiary teaching experience (three years) compared with other interviewees, she seemed to benefit from learning from other teachers' posts and may not have developed confidence to comment on a particular topic.

Some Vietnamese EFL teachers actively sought new experiences in their PD. For example, Hanh submitted an abstract for an international conference and reported finding the process of submitting an abstract and corresponding with conference organisers interesting as she had not done this before. When explaining why she had submitted the abstract, she said:

I think I can gain more experiences... the way that I submit the paper in international conference, the way that I interact with people through emails... now I know about the process.

Exploring new PD experiences is probably driven by teachers' curiosity. An adventurous approach to PD can create a sense of excitement and move teachers beyond their comfort zone. Once the PD activity has been completed, the experience can build teachers' confidence and enhance their professional identity.

Coherence

Mismatches between the PD content and teachers' goals could be discouraging for PD participants. For example, Loc commented that he struggled to understand the content of a course that he attended:

Actually, I didn't learn much because it's the difficulty of the course I think. It's beyond my level. Actually, I didn't think that I enjoyed it. They did have...an earlier course..., but I didn't join that last year. I should have joined that so that I can have more basic knowledge.

Missing initial courses of a series can have a negative impact on participants' engagement with subsequent course content.

Incoherence in PD also occurred when teachers did not find the content to be insightful. When describing a negative experience attending a presentation, Hien said that the content was not insightful because it was not new to her. This point relates to teachers' experience and knowledge. She explained that:

For example, the content of the first presentation is how to engage students in the class... When I attended the presentation, it didn't meet your [sic] expectations. Everything seemed to be like in the previous workshops that I have

attended, or maybe because I'm too old for that. I think that young teachers still find the workshops or the presentation interesting.

As Hien had taught at the university level for 18 years, she was likely to have encountered familiar topics at PD sessions. Her experience suggests the need for PD presenters to cater to the needs of experienced teachers by including a critical element to topics that are likely to be familiar to them.

Four teacher participants reported feeling disengaged when attending compulsory courses that were not directly related to teaching practices. When prompted to provide details of the courses, the participants were reluctant to do so. To engage with PD activities meaningfully, teachers need to see their relevance.

PD facilitators who had some understanding of the local context and empathised with PD course participants could contribute positively to PD coherence, enhancing the alignment between PD activities and teachers' goals. For example, Loc commented that facilitators can have a positive impact on teachers' learning experiences:

I think it comes from the experience of the teacher, the trainer... So, all the teachers are very experienced, and they actually did understand and sympathise with the situation that we are facing, the difficulties and then some of them really customise the feedback.

Presenters and facilitators with some understanding of the local context and an ability to empathise with contextual constraints can provide meaningful learning experiences for the participants.

Sustained Duration

Sustained duration in PD could have a positive impact on teacher learning. A form of interaction that teachers valued was an extended PD occurring in the online asynchronous mode. For example, Hien attended a six-week course which required participants to engage with recorded lectures and submit a weekly assignment. This assignment required participants to post what they had learned and comment on others' posts while enabling them to do so according to their personal schedules:

I think I get a lot and also we can see the feedback of the professor who tutored me in doing the assignment. I got the feedback and... comments that are very effective for my profession... they will read my document and give comments and will tell me what is relevant, what is not OK. What is effective or not? Or sometimes they even give me some suggestions.

In sustained PD activities, extended interactions between PD participants and facilitators become possible, which can enhance a sense of belonging among participants. Such activities also allow participants to evaluate their understanding of a topic and reflect on feedback from the facilitators.

Some participants who valued sustained PD activities were not in favour of frequent PD activities. Duyen, for example, preferred extended PD organised in phases:

It [a PD activity] was very well organised... It's not like we have to go there to take classes for one year straight, but it was organised in different phases. I can't remember exactly, but four or five phases. Each phase is about one or two weeks.

The frequency of PD that would suit teachers is highly dependent on their work schedule and other commitments. As an ideal frequency is unlikely to exist, teachers need to be given the autonomy to plan their PD.

While sustained duration in PD could have a positive impact on teacher learning, it could be restrained by work responsibilities, family commitments, and financial constraints. All interviewees in our study commented that work commitments discouraged them from participating in PD activities on occasion. For example, Linh preferred face-to-face PD activities, but her teaching schedule prevented her from attending them. She explained that preparing for class sometimes interfered with a desire to participate in PD activities.

It's not just we can go to the class and then deliver the two-hour lesson. We may need two to three hours to prepare for the lesson.

Another interviewee, Hien, commented that:

If... my teaching schedules overlap with the time for the conference or the workshop, of course, I cannot attend it because I need to give the priority to my teaching schedule.

Family commitments were mentioned by all seven interviewees. When asked to identify factors that prevented him from participating in PD activities, Khoa commented:

I'm... pretty tight on time because I have a family to take care of and so most of my time spend, you know, clean the house or... laundry and so on... I have very little time left for... PD activities.

Choosing to participate in PD is not entirely a professional decision since it can be influenced by personal factors. It appears that Vietnamese teachers value family closeness, an aspect of their worldview that is likely to have traditional cultural importance.

The financial cost of participating in PD activities was another factor that teachers considered. All interviewees in this study mentioned this aspect in various ways. The expenses teachers encountered in participating in PD opportunities included travel costs, accommodation costs, and conference registration fees. When asked if she considered the financial aspect of participating in PD activities, Hien commented that:

I think it depends on the amount of money that I have to pay. For example, for the TESOL convention in the USA, I'm still waiting for my travel grant status. I still have a few days before I know the result, so I'm not quite sure whether I have the travel grant and... I need to make consideration because in order to go to USA, the flight ticket is of course much higher than the flight ticket to Ho Chi Minh City and also accommodation and travelling costs and many other things.

Although Hien did not comment on the exchange rate, travelling overseas would disadvantage her given the low value of the Vietnamese Dong against the US dollar. For all seven of our participants, a tension seemed to exist between prioritizing personal and professional needs.

Collective Participation

Collective participation involved groups of teachers from the same context participating in PD activities together. This was realised in informal settings. Linh regarded informal conversations with her colleagues to be a positive PD experience:

It usually happened at school in the teacher's room. And other than that, we have some other groups of close friends... we are all colleagues... sometimes we go have lunch or grab some coffee together and we still share about things related to our class.

In such settings, the topics of conversations were unplanned but related to improving classroom practice and discussing research collaboration opportunities. Linh felt that a smaller group was conducive to discussing topics often perceived as intimidating (e.g., evaluation of their teaching practices):

It depends on the people that I talked to. For example, with my co-teacher, we... discuss the atmosphere of the class, the engagement level and the motivation level or some attitude of the students in the class so that we can come up with a better plan than the one we usually use with the class, to make the interaction between teacher and student and the lesson better... We also talk about ideas for our next article or... share the techniques in teaching... I think when we got into a smaller group,... we have like a deeper conversation.

As well as providing a safe space for teachers to discuss their teaching practices, informal PD can promote a sense of community and lead to future PD activities, such as research collaboration.

Participants in our study reported that interacting with teachers from different contexts could be beneficial too. When describing a positive PD experience, Duyen commented that interacting with other participants in a PD course could help teachers become aware of different perspectives and learn about a variety of teaching contexts. Such interactions offered Duyen access to:

...different teaching context... different perspectives, different backgrounds... instead of having to go to different places to learn about the new things,... through the sharing... in the course, we could learn about a lot of contexts that we never experienced before in Hanoi.

Interaction among teachers from diverse teaching backgrounds can enrich teachers' learning experience.

Discussion

Our findings highlight opportunities and challenges in current PD practices in higher education in Vietnam through the lens of Desimone and Garet's (2015) teacher PD framework. We have integrated implications of our study in this section. Our findings suggest that the relevance of PD topics can contribute to positive PD experiences. Topics related to teachers' professional and personal interests may include pedagogical issues and content knowledge (e.g., grammar, linguistics). A misalignment between the topics and teachers' needs can result in teacher boredom as has been found in the PD literature (Avidov-Ungar & Herscu, 2020; Ngo et al., 2022). Such a mismatch can also result in teachers viewing the activities as an additional

burden (Liu, 2012). This mismatch has been attributed to a top-down one-size-fits-all PD approach in Vietnam (Le & Le, 2022; Moore et al., 2023; Ngo et al., 2022). Topics that are not directly related to pedagogy and content knowledge may result in teachers participating in the PD activities for the sake of compliance, also known as “strategic compliance” (Vanassche & Kelchtermans, 2016, p. 364). Another factor that contributes to the mismatch, as reported by Hien, is knowledge gathered through years of teaching experience. Considering the teaching experience of PD participants is therefore necessary when selecting a topic for PD programs.

Although identifying and meeting the diverse interests and needs of teachers are important, these tasks can be challenging. One strategy is for PD organisers to survey teachers' needs and interests by using free online survey tools or seeking information from local professional groups. To avoid a mismatch between the PD topic and teachers' expectations, advertising the event with a concise and accurate summary of the content can better inform teachers' decisions whether to participate in the event or not. Another strategy is to promote self-learning by encouraging teachers to write book reviews as a form of PD (Koay, 2025). Writing book reviews allows teachers to explore personal interests by selecting a recently published book related to their interests to review. This activity can allow them to expand their knowledge and satisfy their professional or personal learning needs. This approach is not without challenges because it may not be formally recognised as a PD activity, which suggests that striking a balance between top-down policy requirements and teacher autonomy can be challenging.

In the context of a seminar or workshop, as reported by our participants, PD organisers need to recruit speakers who are experts in the selected topic (Geldenhuys & Oosthuizen, 2015; Hubers et al., 2022). Those who are considered experts in their field may include local and international lecturers. In limited resource contexts, institutions may consider an exchange system, in which two local universities take turns to share their expertise with each other. As inviting international speakers may incur a higher cost compared to local ones, organisers (e.g., university managers, department heads) could invite international speakers to deliver their sessions online to reduce travel and accommodation expenses. One advantage of this strategy is that the session can be recorded, allowing teachers who attended the session to review the recording and those who were absent to view it later. As well as using the recording as a source of information, it could also be used as a starting point to facilitate teacher discussion in the future.

Besides the expertise of facilitators, the teachers in Vietnam felt that the facilitators' enthusiasm and ability to demonstrate empathy had a positive impact on their learning experience. The role of enthusiasm has been discussed in previous research in other contexts. For example, drawing on questionnaires completed by 97 teachers from 10 schools in a low socioeconomic status area in the North of England, Jolliffe (2015) reported that facilitators' enthusiasm was a key factor that promoted continuous professional learning among the teachers. Facilitators' enthusiasm is probably a manifestation of their experience with and depth of understanding of the topic. In terms of empathy, having an awareness of constraints and challenges in the participants' teaching contexts can allow facilitators to be more understanding. Qualities of PD presenters and facilitators are an aspect of effective PD that was not explicitly included in Desimone and Garet's (2015) framework. Our study shows that facilitators' understanding of local context constraints allows them to meet teachers' unique needs more effectively, contributing positively to PD coherence. While planning for a PD session is essential, PD facilitators need to be willing and prepared to improvise on the spot to meet the needs of the participants. For PD organisers, identifying appropriate speakers is necessary and can be facilitated by word of mouth. PD organisers may draw upon recommendations from professional networks to identify suitable candidates and/or ask participants to propose candidates whom they think may have the desired qualities.

While sustained PD activities benefit teachers (Desimone & Garet, 2025), such activities, in the Vietnamese context, can be prevented by work and family commitments, as well as financial constraints. Our finding is consistent with previous research findings in Vietnam (Huynh & Nguyen, 2025; Nguyen et al., 2023). For example, Ngo et al. (2022) observed that female teachers in Vietnam, particularly those who were married, experienced a tension between domestic commitments and professional responsibilities due to traditional cultural norms. In other developing countries, such as Ghana, teachers reported that time constraints due to work and family commitments prevented them from participating in PD activities frequently (Salifu et al., 2024). Particularly in low-income and lower-middle income countries, teachers may experience a tension between pursuing professional goals and fulfilling family responsibilities. In the Vietnamese context, this tension is in part due to a one-size-fits-all approach employed in top-down teacher training programs, characterised by unrealistic goals and hasty implementation (Tran-Thanh, 2025).

To address these challenges, university managers may consider mentoring as a form of PD (Irby et al., 2017). One advantage of mentoring is that it can happen organically within an institution without involving significant expenses. Another advantage of this approach is that it benefits both the mentor and mentee, as such interactions can result in mutual learning. However, mentoring is not without its challenges. In environments where hierarchy is valued, such as Vietnam, mentors may have a higher status compared to the mentee. This power imbalance can result in mentors assuming the role of instructor or teacher while neglecting their roles as a sounding board, a supporter, and an encourager.

To reduce the power imbalance, mentees can be given the opportunity to propose their preferred mentor to the coordinator. To ensure mutual agreement between the mentor and the mentee, mediated by the coordinator, prospective mentors can be given the option to accept or decline the opportunity. Another strategy to address this issue is by implementing a critical friends group (Vo & Nguyen, 2010). This method involves a pair or a small group of teachers observing each other's classes and exchanging feedback. Comments from Vietnamese teachers in our study suggest that a critical friends' group could be an effective method because it resembles their informal lunchtime conversations. Also, such informal interactions could be a preferred PD due to its collegial environment (Duong, 2021).

Drawing on our participants' experiences, various reported constraints (e.g., time, financial resources) can be addressed by encouraging participation in online asynchronous courses and online professional groups on various social networking platforms. In the Vietnamese context, online PD has been reported to allow teachers to manage their learning pace, reduce PD costs, and minimise assessment pressure (Truong & Murray, 2019). An example of a growing online professional community is *Teacher Voices: Professional Development*, a Facebook group that aims to provide a platform for English language professionals from around the world to share teaching ideas and research information. Another strategy for addressing teachers' shortage of time is to promote teacher reflection as a regular part of their routine (Farrell & Macapinlac, 2021). For example, they can reflect on their teaching practices while having lunch or travelling to work. Clearly, any effective PD needs to consider participants' circumstances.

In terms of the design of PD activities, our participants reported that opportunities to interact with facilitators and colleagues benefited their professional learning experiences. These interactions included sharing teaching ideas with and engaging with feedback from others in both formal and informal settings. Such interactions are valuable to teachers because they can learn from one another, particularly from those teaching in different contexts. Particularly for early-career EFL teachers in Vietnam, receiving peer feedback has been reported to be valued and appreciated (Nguyen, 2016). Although the importance of teachers

from the same context learning together was highlighted in Desimone and Garet (2015), our study shows that teachers can also benefit from interacting with peers from different contexts. To maximise teacher interaction in formal structured PD activities, such as seminars and workshops, PD designers need to allocate time for participants to discuss a topic that has been presented, summarise what they have learned, and share challenges and strategies from their teaching context can benefit them. This may include organising participants in small groups (Dickerson et al., 2014). University managers can also create opportunities for participants from different departments to interact to promote cross-institution collaboration (Geldenhuys & Oosthuizen, 2015).

Conclusion

This article has investigated Vietnamese EFL teachers' experiences in participating in PD activities. Our study found that focusing PD sessions on topics relevant to teachers' professional and personal interests can have a positive impact. Our study also found that having presenters and facilitators who are perceived by teachers to be credible and kind can contribute positively to PD coherence. Our interview data established that Vietnamese teachers value active interactions with presenters, facilitators, and their peers. Contextualising Desimone and Garet's (2015) framework, our study found that interaction among teachers from different contexts can also enhance teacher learning. Vietnamese teachers found that sustained PD is beneficial, although it is hindered by teachers' circumstances, including their work and family commitments and financial considerations.

As all research has its limitations, we would like to acknowledge those in this exploratory inquiry. While a small number of participants is typical in qualitative research, the study could be strengthened by recruiting additional participants until data saturation is reached (Mahalingappa et al., 2021). While focusing on participants from one department of a university allows us to gather rich and nuanced data from a specific research context, this approach does not allow us to determine whether such experiences are common to teachers in other departments, universities, or regions. Future research could recruit participants from diverse contexts to compare the experiences of teachers from different countries. Another limitation of our study is the use of English in the interviews. Using the interviewees' first language instead may have a positive impact on data richness and depth of responses (Yung, 2015). To enhance the quality of the interviews, we encourage future researchers to consider using the interviewees' first language and English. Having a shared language between the interviewer and interviewees may reduce communication barriers and promote rapport. In terms of data analysis, the trustworthiness of our interpretation can be enhanced by consulting interviewees.

Drawing on teachers' experience participating in PD, our study has identified characteristics associated with effective PD for English language professionals in Vietnam. We hope that organisers of PD activities at all levels (e.g., university, regional, national) in Vietnam and other relevant countries will consider findings from our study when planning, designing, and organising these activities to enhance teachers' learning experiences. We encourage policymakers to consider designing PD programs that are inclusive and appropriate to the local sociocultural context. While having a standardised teacher PD framework can promote consistency across various institutions (Ghaemi & Boroushaki, 2025), a flexible approach is necessary to ensure feasibility and promote active participation from teaching staff.

Declaration of Generative AI Use

No AI tools were used for the generation of research hypotheses or the writing of conclusions. The final manuscript was authored and reviewed by the listed authors without additional AI input.

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Appendix: Interview Questions

1. How would you describe your PD experience?
2. Is there a PD experience that you find particularly positive? If so, can you describe that experience for me?
3. Is there a PD experience that you find particularly unpleasant? If so, can you describe that experience for me?
4. What encourages you to participate in PD activities?
5. What prevents you from participating in PD activities?