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EFL TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS AND PRACTICES OF PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT IN DONG THAP PROVINCE, VIETNAM

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Abstract

Professional development is increasingly recognized as a critical component of educational reform in Vietnam, especially in rural regions. This study investigates the perceptions and practices of English as a Foreign Language secondary school teachers regarding professional development in Dong Thap Province, addressing a lack of research in rural contexts. Employing an explanatory sequential mixed-methods approach, the research first surveyed 120 teachers using a structured questionnaire and then conducted semi-structured interviews with eight selected participants. Quantitative findings revealed strong support for professional development as a continuous and reflective process, with mentoring and Communities of Practice rated most favorably. Qualitative results confirmed the value of context-sensitive, teacher-driven, and collaborative models, while also exposing challenges such as time constraints, inconsistent participation, and limited institutional support. These findings emphasize the need for more flexible, contextually relevant professional development approaches that empower teacher autonomy and foster sustainable professional growth.

Keywords: *Communities of Practice, English as a Foreign Language teachers, mentoring, professional development.*

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NHẬN THỨC VÀ THỰC TIỄN PHÁT TRIỂN CHUYÊN MÔN CỦA GIÁO VIÊN TIẾNG ANH TẠI TỈNH ĐỒNG THÁP, VIỆT NAM

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Tóm tắt

Phát triển chuyên môn đóng vai trò quan trọng trong cải cách giáo dục tại Việt Nam, đặc biệt tại những khu vực nông thôn. Nghiên cứu này nhằm tìm hiểu cách giáo viên dạy tiếng Anh như ngôn ngữ thứ hai ở bậc trung học cơ sở tại tỉnh Đồng Tháp nhìn nhận và thực hành hoạt động phát triển chuyên môn, từ đó góp phần bổ sung cho những khoảng trống trong nghiên cứu ở các bối cảnh nông thôn. Nghiên cứu được thực hiện theo phương pháp hỗn hợp theo trình tự giải thích, bắt đầu bằng khảo sát 120 giáo viên bằng cách sử dụng bảng hỏi có cấu trúc, sau đó phỏng vấn tám giáo viên được chọn theo tiêu chí phù hợp. Kết quả định lượng cho thấy phần lớn giáo viên xem phát triển chuyên môn là một quá trình liên tục và phản ánh, trong đó hình thức kèm cặp và cộng đồng thực hành được đánh giá cao. Dữ liệu phỏng vấn làm sáng tỏ thêm vai trò của các mô hình phát triển chuyên môn phù hợp với thực tiễn giảng dạy, do giáo viên chủ động thực hiện và mang tính hợp tác. Tuy nhiên, nhiều giáo viên vẫn gặp khó khăn như thiếu thời gian, sự tham gia không đồng đều và thiếu hỗ trợ từ phía nhà trường. Kết quả nghiên cứu cho thấy cần xây dựng các hình thức phát triển chuyên môn linh hoạt, phù hợp với điều kiện tại địa phương, đồng thời tạo điều kiện để giáo viên phát huy vai trò chủ động và phát triển nghề nghiệp một cách bền vững.

Từ khóa: Cộng đồng thực hành, giáo viên tiếng Anh, kèm cặp, phát triển chuyên môn.

1. Introduction

In recent years, the role of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers in Vietnam has become increasingly demanding, shaped by ongoing educational reforms that emphasize communicative competence and learner-centered approaches. The 2018 General Education Program (GEP 2018) and directives such as Conclusion No. 91-KL/TW call for competency-based instruction and continuous pedagogical innovation. To meet these expectations, teachers must engage in ongoing professional development (PD) that enhances both instructional strategies and adaptability. PD is widely recognized as essential for teacher growth and instructional improvement, particularly when it is sustained, collaborative, and aligned with real classroom contexts (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017; Desimone, 2009; Villegas-Reimers, 2003). For EFL educators, effective PD fosters improved language teaching, supports curriculum adaptation, and contributes to student learning. Models such as mentoring, coaching, and Communities of Practice (CoP) have been shown to encourage reflection and continuous professional learning (Knight, 2008; Vescio et al., 2008). Despite these frameworks, rural and under-resourced areas like Dong Thap Province continue to face barriers to meaningful PD. Teachers encounter heavy workloads, limited resources, and insufficient institutional support, while PD activities often remain top-down and insufficiently connected to teachers' classroom realities (Nguyen & Dao, 2020; Pham & Hamid, 2013). Although national policy increasingly promotes teacher development, limited research has examined how rural secondary EFL teachers perceive and engage with PD, particularly regarding effectiveness, challenges, and contextual relevance.

This study addresses that gap by investigating EFL teachers' perceptions and practices of PD in Dong Thap Province. Using an explanatory sequential mixed-methods design, it draws on survey data from 120 secondary EFL teachers and follow-up interviews with eight purposively selected participants. The study explores how teachers conceptualize PD, which strategies and models they value, and what challenges they encounter in applying PD to practice. By integrating quantitative and qualitative findings, the research aims to inform the development of more effective, context-responsive PD initiatives for rural Vietnamese educational settings.

2. Theoretical overview and research background

Teacher PD has long been recognised as a cornerstone for enhancing instructional quality and supporting large-scale curriculum reforms, particularly in contexts such as EFL, where teachers must continually adapt to shifting pedagogical paradigms, language proficiency standards, and learner needs. Over the past four decades, a range of theoretical frameworks and models have emerged, each emphasising different pathways through which teachers learn, transform practice, and sustain professional growth.

One influential strand is individually oriented models, rooted in the work of Schön (2017), which stress reflective practice and experiential learning as central to teacher development. According to Kolb's (1984) experiential learning cycle, which says that reflection is the most important part of professional growth. These models frame PD as a dynamic process of "reflection-in-action" and "reflection-on-action," enabling teachers to critically evaluate their classroom decisions, experiment with alternatives, and build a repertoire of strategies. While powerful in fostering autonomy, these approaches risk becoming fragmented or superficial if teachers are not supported within broader organisational cultures that value reflection.

The second cluster is mentoring and coaching models, widely adopted to induct novice teachers and to provide targeted support for in-service professionals. Knight (2008) conceptualised instructional coaching as a partnership model that empowers teachers through collaborative goal-setting and feedback, while Hobson et al. (2009) and Ingersoll and Strong

(2011) provided empirical evidence that mentoring enhances teacher retention, confidence, and instructional effectiveness. These models emphasise personal guidance, scaffolding, and relational trust, positioning mentoring as a critical bridge between theory and practice. However, their success depends heavily on the quality of mentor preparation, institutional time allocation, and the presence of a supportive school culture.

A third set comprises collaborative and collective models, including study groups, lesson study, Professional Learning Communities, and CoPs (Vescio et al., 2008; Wei et al., 2010; Wenger, 1998). These models conceptualise PD not as an individual endeavour but as a socially constructed process, in which teachers co-construct knowledge, engage in joint inquiry, and share professional responsibility. They are valued for promoting sustained engagement, collective efficacy, and peer accountability. Yet, in hierarchical or compliance-driven educational systems, collaborative models sometimes become ritualistic, limiting the genuine exchange of ideas and innovation (Le, 2019; Vo & Nguyen, 2010).

A related but distinct approach is site-based development (SBD), which refers to professional learning activities conducted within the school environment and tailored to its specific conditions. Unlike centrally organised workshops, SBD initiatives - such as lesson study, peer observation, or internally facilitated workshops - emphasise contextual relevance and teacher ownership (Joyce & Showers, 2002). They enable teachers to collaboratively address local instructional challenges, thus promoting both professional growth and school improvement. However, research also highlights limitations, including time constraints and variable institutional support (Avalos, 2011).

By contrast, formal training models - including workshops, cascade training, and centralised seminars - represent one of the oldest and most prevalent approaches to PD. Guskey (2002) argued that while such models are effective for introducing new content at scale, they are frequently criticised for their “one-shot” delivery, lack of contextual relevance, and weak follow-up. Villegas-Reimers (2003) reinforced this critique, emphasising that without opportunities for adaptation and reflection, training risks remaining disconnected from classroom realities. Nonetheless, these models remain attractive to policymakers due to their perceived efficiency, scalability, and ease of monitoring.

Recent scholarship increasingly advocates hybrid or integrated approaches, which combine elements of reflection, coaching, collaboration, and structured training. Avalos (2011), in a decade-long review of PD research, highlighted the necessity of integrating multiple models to balance teacher autonomy with institutional guidance. Similarly, Darling-Hammond et al. (2017) synthesised evidence across contexts to conclude that effective PD is characterised by content focus, active learning, coherence with policy, sustained duration, and collective participation - principles that transcend any single model. These hybrid approaches reflect a paradigm shift toward viewing PD as a continuous, systemic process embedded in teachers’ professional lives, rather than as isolated events.

In the Vietnamese context, teacher PD has gained increasing prominence since the introduction of competency-based reforms, particularly the GEP 2018 (MoET, 2018). National policy documents consistently stress the centrality of PD in equipping teachers to design competency-based curricula, apply communicative teaching methods, and integrate digital technologies. However, as Pham and Hamid (2013) and Nguyen and Dao (2020) demonstrate, the translation of these policy ideals into practice is uneven. Much of the existing research has examined PD in urban or tertiary contexts, leaving the voices of rural secondary teachers relatively underrepresented. EFL teachers in provinces such as Dong Thap face distinctive challenges: limited access to updated resources, heavy workloads that constrain time for

reflection, and insufficient institutional recognition for their contributions. These systemic barriers not only restrict teachers' ability to engage fully with PD but also limit the potential of PD to achieve its intended outcomes.

3. Data and research methods

This study employed an explanatory sequential mixed-methods design (Creswell & Creswell, 2017), consisting of two phases: an initial quantitative stage followed by a qualitative stage to elaborate and clarify the statistical findings. This design was chosen to provide a comprehensive understanding of EFL teachers' perceptions and practices of PD in Dong Thap Province by integrating broad quantitative patterns with rich qualitative insights.

In the quantitative phase, data were collected from 120 EFL teachers working in public lower secondary schools across Dong Thap Province. A stratified random sampling approach ensured balanced representation from both urban and rural areas, as well as across different levels of teaching experience. The sample included teachers with a wide age range (mid-20s to over 50 years old) and teaching experience from fewer than five years to more than twenty years, thereby capturing perspectives from both novice and veteran educators. In terms of gender, approximately two-thirds of the participants were female, reflecting the overall demographic distribution of EFL teachers in Vietnam. Participants also varied in terms of professional roles, with most serving as classroom teachers, while a minority held additional responsibilities such as head of department or subject leader. This diversity in demographic and professional background enhanced the representativeness of the sample and allowed for meaningful comparison across subgroups. Participants completed a structured questionnaire comprising 58 Likert-scale items, organised into four main sections addressing PD understanding, preferred strategies and models, and perceived effectiveness and challenges. The instrument underwent expert validation and pilot testing, yielding strong internal consistency (Cronbach's Alpha = 0.87). The subsequent qualitative phase involved semi-structured interviews with eight teachers who had also participated in the survey. Participants were purposively selected to ensure variation in school setting (urban and rural schools), years of teaching experience (ranging from 3 to 22 years), and levels of engagement with formal PD activities (from highly active to minimally involved). The interviewees also varied in gender (five female and three male) and professional roles. Regarding educational background, all had at least a bachelor's degree in English language teaching. Their exposure to PD opportunities likewise differed - some reported frequent participation in workshops, mentoring, or CoPs, whereas others described limited access to structured PD due to heavy workloads or lack of institutional support. Interviews lasted 30-45 minutes and were conducted in private settings to ensure confidentiality and encourage candid responses. The interview guide explored personal experiences with PD models and strategies, perceived impacts on professional practice, barriers to participation, and suggestions for improvement. This diversity of profiles provided a rich dataset for capturing multiple perspectives and for triangulating the quantitative findings..

Quantitative data were analyzed using SPSS, with descriptive statistics (means and standard deviations) used to summarize responses across the four domains of the questionnaire. These analyses provided an overview of how participants perceived the nature, purposes, importance, and strategies of PD. Thematic analysis of qualitative data followed Braun and Clarke's (2019) six-phase reflexive framework, with transcripts coded inductively and themes generated to capture patterns in teachers' views on PD strategies, experiences, and systemic challenges. Integrating findings from both phases enabled methodological triangulation and produced a nuanced understanding of PD practices within the context of Vietnamese lower secondary EFL education.

4. Results and discussion

4.1. Results

4.1.1. Findings from the questionnaire

a. Teachers' perceptions of the nature of professional development

The survey results provide quantitative evidence of EFL teachers in Dong Thap Province conceptualize the nature of PD. Findings reveal a predominant view of PD as a continuous and dynamic process, integrated into ongoing professional practice, as opposed to being perceived merely as a collection of discrete or one-off activities.

Table 1. Teachers' perceptions of the nature of professional development

Aspect of PD	Mean (M)	Standard Deviation (SD)
1. PD is a continuous, ongoing process	4.42	0.65
2. PD includes mentoring and coaching	4.10	0.80
3. PD involves collaborative group learning	3.95	0.92
4. PD requires reflective practice	4.00	0.85
5. PD is externally mandated	3.22	1.10

As presented in Table 1, the highest-rated statement was “PD is a continuous, ongoing process” ($M = 4.42$, $SD = 0.65$), indicating that teachers consider PD to be central to their sustained professional growth. Mentoring and coaching were also rated highly ($M = 4.10$, $SD = 0.80$), suggesting that teachers value structured support from experienced colleagues or specialists as a means of addressing practical classroom needs and receiving personalized, ongoing guidance. Reflective practice received a similarly strong rating ($M = 4.00$, $SD = 0.85$), highlighting that self-assessment and critical reflection are regarded as important mechanisms for enhancing instructional effectiveness. Collaborative group learning, while acknowledged as beneficial ($M = 3.95$, $SD = 0.92$), was rated slightly lower, which may imply that practical constraints, such as time and workload, limit its regular implementation. By contrast, the item “PD is externally mandated” recorded the lowest mean score ($M = 3.22$, $SD = 1.10$), reflecting relatively low enthusiasm for top-down PD initiatives that may lack contextual alignment or teacher input. Overall, the data indicate a consistent preference for PD activities that are sustained, contextually relevant, and oriented toward professional autonomy, thereby providing an empirical basis for further analysis of preferred PD formats and their potential impact on teaching improvement.

b. Teachers' perceptions of the purposes of professional development

The study explored how EFL teachers in Dong Thap Province perceive the purposes of PD, with particular attention to its intended outcomes in relation to their teaching responsibilities and broader educational priorities. Quantitative findings indicate that teachers place strong emphasis on PD as a mechanism for enhancing instructional quality, responding to change, and sustaining professional relevance. As presented in Table 2, the highest-rated purpose of PD was “to improve student learning outcomes” ($M = 4.38$, $SD = 0.73$), followed closely by “updating teaching methods” ($M = 4.25$, $SD = 0.88$) and “adapting to educational changes” ($M = 4.18$, $SD = 0.91$). These results suggest that teachers conceptualize PD as primarily outcome-oriented, with a clear instructional focus. The prioritization of student achievement underscores a strong sense of professional accountability and reflects the belief that PD should have a direct and measurable impact on learners' academic progress.

Table 2. Teachers' perceptions of the purpose of professional development

Purpose of PD	Mean (M)	Standard Deviation (SD)
1. Improve student outcomes	4.38	0.73
2. Update teaching methods	4.25	0.88
3. Adapt to educational changes	4.18	0.91
4. Personal development and job satisfaction	4.07	0.94
5. Foster collaboration among peers	3.95	1.02

Teachers also assigned relatively high ratings to “personal development and job satisfaction” ($M = 4.07$, $SD = 0.94$), reflecting recognition of PD as a means of enhancing self-efficacy and sustaining long-term career engagement. While not ranked as the top priority, this dimension highlights the role of PD in fostering teacher motivation and reinforcing professional identity. The lowest-rated item in this category was “fostering collaboration among peers” ($M = 3.95$, $SD = 1.02$), suggesting that, although peer collaboration is viewed as beneficial, it is not yet perceived as a primary function of PD. This pattern points to potential gaps in current PD practices, particularly in facilitating structured, peer-driven learning opportunities. Overall, the findings indicate that teachers place greatest value on PD activities that yield measurable improvements in student learning, support pedagogical innovation, and enable adaptation to ongoing educational reforms. Personal growth and collegial interaction are also recognized as meaningful outcomes, though they remain secondary to the core instructional objectives of PD.

c. Teachers' perceptions of the importance of professional development

Quantitative results from the study illustrate how EFL teachers in Dong Thap Province assess the significance of PD across multiple dimensions. As presented in Table 3, the data reveal a strong consensus that PD is essential not only for advancing individual teacher competencies but also for contributing to broader institutional improvement and aligning with policy-driven educational objectives.

Table 3. Teachers' perceptions of the importance of professional development

Importance of PD	Mean (M)	Standard Deviation (SD)
1. PD is essential for school development	4.56	0.58
2. PD enhances teachers' professional knowledge	4.72	0.47
3. PD supports the implementation of the GEP 2018	4.45	0.66
4. PD builds professional confidence and reduces stress	4.22	0.72
5. PD directly improves student learning outcomes	4.05	0.75

The highest-rated item was “PD enhances teachers' professional knowledge” ($M = 4.72$, $SD = 0.47$), underscoring that teachers view PD as essential for keeping abreast of pedagogical innovations and subject-specific advancements. This was closely followed by “PD is essential for school development” ($M = 4.56$, $SD = 0.58$), reflecting a shared perception that PD contributes significantly to the overall success of the institution. Teachers also placed considerable value on PD as a means of facilitating national educational reforms, with the item “PD supports the implementation of the GEP 2018” receiving a mean score of 4.45 ($SD =$

0.66). This result highlights strong recognition of PD's role in equipping educators to meet new curriculum demands and instructional standards. Beyond technical competencies, PD was also seen as beneficial for enhancing emotional resilience and professional well-being. The item "PD builds professional confidence and reduces stress" scored 4.22 (SD = 0.72), indicating that teachers associate PD participation with reduced work-related pressure and heightened teaching self-efficacy. In contrast, the lowest-rated item in this category was "PD directly improves student learning outcomes" (M = 4.05, SD = 0.75). While still positively assessed, this score suggests that teachers may view PD's impact on student outcomes as indirect or mediated by other factors, such as instructional context and student engagement. Overall, the findings portray PD as a critical mechanism for both instructional enhancement and broader educational advancement. Teachers' responses reflect a belief in its enduring value-not only as a means of refining teaching practice but also as a strategic foundation for adapting to change and driving school-wide progress.

d. Teachers' perceptions of specific PD strategies

The study investigated teachers' preferences regarding specific PD strategies and revealed a clear inclination toward personalized and reflective approaches. Table 4 presents the mean scores and standard deviations for five commonly implemented strategies: mentoring, reflective practice, workshops, peer coaching, and team coaching.

Table 4. Teachers' perceptions of specific PD strategies

PD strategies	Mean (M)	Standard Deviation (SD)
1. Mentoring	4.06	0.83
2. Reflective practice	4.04	0.84
3. Workshops	3.99	0.81
4. Peer coaching	3.99	0.79
5. Team coaching	3.92	0.85

Among the five strategies assessed, mentoring received the highest mean score (M = 4.06, SD = 0.83), indicating that teachers place high value on individualized support and guidance from more experienced colleagues. Reflective practice was also rated highly (M = 4.04, SD = 0.84), suggesting that teachers regard self-evaluation and critical reflection as essential mechanisms for enhancing instructional effectiveness. Workshops and peer coaching, while common in practice, received slightly lower but still favorable ratings (M = 3.99 for both), indicating that these strategies are viewed as useful but may be limited in addressing the specific contextual needs of individual teachers. Team coaching recorded the lowest mean score among the five (M = 3.92, SD = 0.85), though it was still positively evaluated, reflecting recognition of its potential for collaborative learning if effectively structured. Overall, the findings suggest that EFL teachers in Dong Thap Province favor PD approaches that are personalized, contextually embedded, and responsive to their specific needs. Strategies such as mentoring and reflective practice were most preferred, while group-based methods-particularly team coaching-were perceived as less impactful, pointing to opportunities for targeted enhancement and support.

e. Teachers' perceptions of common PD models

The study examined teachers' perceptions of four commonly implemented PD models: coaching/mentoring, CoPs, site-based development, and the traditional training model. The quantitative data, as shown in Table 5, indicate that teachers clearly favor models that are

personalized, collaborative, and context-sensitive.

Table 5. Teachers' perceptions of common professional development models

PD models	Mean (M)	Standard Deviation (SD)
1. Coaching/Mentoring	4.10	0.80
2. Communities of Practice (CoPs)	4.08	0.81
3. Site-Based Development	4.03	0.78
4. Training Model	3.96	0.82

Among the models evaluated, coaching/mentoring achieved the highest mean score ($M = 4.10$, $SD = 0.80$), indicating that teachers place considerable value on individualized support from experienced colleagues or external experts. This model is regarded as effective for providing tailored feedback and fostering reflective teaching practices. The CoPs model was rated closely behind ($M = 4.08$, $SD = 0.81$), highlighting teachers' appreciation for peer collaboration, shared problem-solving, and informal knowledge exchange. Site-based development received a comparable rating ($M = 4.03$, $SD = 0.78$), reflecting the perceived benefits of PD conducted within the school environment, where training can be directly aligned with immediate classroom needs. By contrast, the traditional training model obtained the lowest mean score ($M = 3.96$, $SD = 0.82$). Although still in use, it was perceived as less effective due to its top-down delivery and limited opportunities for personalization. Overall, the results point to a clear preference for PD models that are contextually relevant, promote professional dialogue, and support sustained improvement. The comparatively lower score for traditional workshops suggests a shift toward more dynamic, teacher-centered approaches to professional learning.

4.1.2. Findings from the interviews

a. Teachers' engagement in professional development

The interview data provided an in-depth understanding of how teachers engage with PD, reinforcing and expanding upon the quantitative findings. While the questionnaire highlighted strong agreement with the view that "PD is a continuous, ongoing process" ($M = 4.42$, $SD = 0.65$), the interviews revealed how teachers translated this belief into practice. Participants consistently described PD as an integral part of their professional identity, not limited to attending formal workshops. For example, several teachers explained that they routinely sought feedback from colleagues, participated in online teaching forums, and reflected on student responses as everyday forms of PD. One experienced teacher commented, *"I always consider PD to be part of my work; it's not something occasional but something I do daily when I reflect on my lessons and exchange ideas with peers."* Such accounts underscore that teachers viewed PD as embedded in their professional routines, thereby reinforcing - but also enriching - the survey findings with concrete illustrations of teacher-driven learning.

Teachers from different school settings (urban and rural) and with varying years of experience described their engagement with PD as largely self-initiated and sustained. Many explained that they did not rely solely on official mandates but instead proactively sought out learning opportunities. For instance, Teacher C, with fourteen years of experience in a rural school, shared: *"I always consider PD to be a regular and essential part of my work. I proactively attend training sessions, follow educational forums, and exchange resources with fellow English teachers online. I also self-study and reflect on my teaching through feedback"*

from students and peers.” This account aligns closely with the high quantitative ratings for reflective practice ($M = 4.00$, $SD = 0.85$) and mentoring and coaching ($M = 4.10$, $SD = 0.80$), indicating that teachers valued self-directed learning supported by peer input and reflection.

In addition, teachers frequently noted that PD was embedded in their day-to-day teaching activities. Rather than viewing PD as separate from their routine work, participants highlighted informal peer interactions, online engagement, and real-time adaptation as crucial components of professional learning. As Teacher H stated, *“PD isn’t something I wait for - it’s something I look for.”* This perspective demonstrates that several participants - particularly those with between five and fifteen years of teaching experience - took active ownership of their professional growth, often working beyond formal structures to build capacity. By contrast, two interviewees, both with over fifteen years of service and working in more bureaucratic school environments, described their involvement as more passive and compliance-based. Teacher F noted: *“I mostly follow the PD activities planned by the department. If there is a training course or workshop, I attend. But I don’t usually seek them out myself.”* Her experience illustrates the gap between teacher-driven and externally mandated PD, which was reflected in the lower score for externally imposed PD in the survey ($M = 3.22$, $SD = 1.10$).

Another recurring theme in the interviews was the importance of contextually relevant PD. Teachers were more engaged when the content addressed specific instructional challenges such as competency-based lesson planning, formative assessment, or classroom technology use. As Teacher B put it, *“When the PD sessions focus on things like building lessons based on students’ competencies or how to assess performance in group work, I feel more motivated to participate. It’s relevant to what I’m doing daily.”* This highlights the need for PD programs to be responsive and grounded in actual classroom realities. Peer learning and collaborative dialogue were also emphasized as highly effective forms of engagement. Teachers described frequent informal exchanges with colleagues - whether through school-based meetings, joint lesson planning, or reflective conversations - as central to their ongoing development. Teacher G explained: *“That kind of peer conversation is one of the most effective forms of PD for me.”* These teacher-driven interactions provided not only pedagogical insight but also emotional reassurance, as teachers felt less isolated, more encouraged, and more confident when their challenges were acknowledged and shared by peers. This sense of collegial solidarity reinforced findings from the questionnaire about the value of collaboration, despite practical constraints.

In summary, the interview data confirmed that teachers regard PD as a sustained, reflective, and context-sensitive process. Five of the eight interviewees reported that they actively shaped their own development through informal and collaborative means, while the remainder described their engagement as more dependent on formally mandated activities. The contrast between teacher-led and top-down PD also points to the importance of enabling greater autonomy and flexibility in future PD design.

b. Experiences with common professional development models

The interview findings elaborated on teachers’ experiences with four key PD models: identified in the survey: the site-based development, CoPs, and mentoring/coaching. These models - previously ranked in the questionnaire with varying levels of effectiveness - were discussed in terms of applicability, relevance, and associated challenges. Six of the eight interviewees reported being familiar with the traditional training model, most commonly implemented through district- or province-level workshops. Teacher A noted, *“I attended workshops where an excellent teacher would deliver a model lesson, and then everyone gave feedback. We discussed the strengths and possible improvements of that lesson.”* While some teachers appreciated this model for offering exposure to new techniques, others criticized its lack of practicality. Teacher G commented, *“These training sessions often feel more like*

performances than genuine learning. We're expected to observe but rarely have the chance to relate the ideas to our own teaching contexts." These accounts support the lower rating this model received in the questionnaire ($M = 3.96$), reflecting its limited adaptability to classroom-specific needs.

Conversely, site-based development was widely endorsed for its contextual relevance. Teachers described how this model allows PD to be directly aligned with specific school conditions, student needs, and team goals. Teacher B shared, *"At our school, we assess our teaching challenges first, then design PD around those issues. We create plans tailored to our real teaching conditions - like lesson studies, team observations, and internal workshops."* This practical approach aligns with the survey's favorable rating of site-based development ($M = 4.03$). Nevertheless, teachers acknowledged barriers such as time constraints and the lack of standardized materials. As Teacher F noted, *"Even though it's effective, we struggle to find the time. Everyone's already overwhelmed with teaching, paperwork, and other responsibilities."* Despite these limitations, the model was praised for its practicality and adaptability.

Teachers also discussed their engagement in CoPs, which facilitate collaborative problem-solving and peer learning. Many described CoPs as both formal (e.g., monthly team meetings) and informal (e.g., online group chats). Teacher C explained, *"We have monthly subject team meetings where we analyze lesson plans together. We also use a Zalo group to share materials and help each other when we face difficulties in the classroom."* Such collaborative environments were valued for promoting continuous dialogue and shared responsibility, consistent with their high rating in the survey ($M = 4.08$). However, concerns were raised about the rigidity of CoP structures. Teacher E observed, *"Sometimes it feels like we have to follow a fixed teaching method. If you try something different, it's seen as wrong - even if it works better for your students."* These comments suggest that while CoPs are intended to encourage innovation, they may inadvertently inhibit flexibility without supportive facilitation.

Mentoring and coaching, the most highly rated model in the survey ($M = 4.10$), were perceived as crucial, particularly for novice teachers or those navigating curricular reforms. Teacher D emphasized the personal impact of this model: *"Having a mentor helped me improve my classroom management. It's easier to grow when someone is there to guide you step-by-step."* These one-on-one relationships were seen as highly effective for building confidence and promoting reflective practice. However, teachers pointed out significant implementation challenges, such as limited time and insufficient mentor preparation. Teacher D further noted, *"Some mentors don't really have training. They're good teachers, but they're not always sure how to support others effectively."* Effective mentorship, it appears, depends on both interpersonal dynamics and institutional structures that support the mentoring process.

In conclusion, interview data confirmed and contextualized the questionnaire results. Teachers consistently favored PD models that are personalized, embedded in their work context, and foster collaborative inquiry. Traditional training, while occasionally beneficial for introducing broad concepts, lacks contextual depth. Site-based PD and CoPs were recognized for their immediate relevance, though dependent on time and organizational support. Mentoring and coaching stood out as powerful tools for sustained growth, provided mentors are well-equipped and the relationships are trust-based. These insights underline the importance of flexible, teacher-driven PD approaches supported by strong institutional frameworks.

c. Perceived impacts of professional development on teaching practice

Interview data offered compelling confirmation of the positive impacts of PD reported in the questionnaire phase. Teachers consistently described how PD influenced their teaching strategies, confidence, professional identity, and collaboration. These accounts aligned with

the quantitative findings, particularly those related to the enhancement of professional knowledge ($M = 4.72$, $SD = 0.47$), school development ($M = 4.56$, $SD = 0.58$), and confidence-building ($M = 4.22$, $SD = 0.72$). Across school contexts, teachers reported pedagogical improvements resulting from their PD experiences, especially those tied to mentoring, site-based initiatives, and CoPs. For instance, *“After attending lesson study activities and receiving feedback from peers, I started designing more interactive group tasks. I noticed students became more engaged and willing to speak up”* (Teacher H). This illustrates how PD contributes to instructional innovation and student participation. Teachers also emphasized how PD enhanced their confidence and professional motivation. *“I used to be unsure when trying new methods. But after having a mentor who guided me, I feel much more confident to take risks and adjust my teaching based on what works for my students”* (Teacher D). Such reflections reinforce the value of supportive PD in fostering self-efficacy and sustained professional engagement.

Another recurring theme was PD’s role in strengthening collegial relationships and a shared sense of professional identity. As Teacher C explained, *“During our subject group meetings, we don’t just talk about technical things. We also share our experiences and support each other when someone feels overwhelmed. That kind of sharing makes me feel like I’m not alone in this job.”* This underscores PD’s role in cultivating a collegial culture and addressing the emotional dimensions of teaching. Although immediate student achievement gains were not widely reported, several teachers noted indirect benefits. *“It’s not like test scores went up overnight, but students are definitely more responsive now. They ask more questions and seem to enjoy learning more”* (Teacher G). This perception aligns with the lower rating for direct student outcomes ($M = 4.05$), suggesting that PD’s influence is seen as mediated through improved teacher performance over time. Crucially, teachers stressed that reflection and adaptability were central to PD’s effectiveness. Teacher B noted, *“It’s not just about attending training. It’s about thinking after the training - asking yourself how this fits your class, your students. That’s when the real impact happens.”* This highlights the importance of follow-up and internal processing in translating PD content into meaningful classroom practice. Finally, teachers linked PD with increased agency and leadership. Some described initiating digital lessons, leading workshops, or creating teaching resources after attending PD. As Teacher E stated, *“Before, I just followed what others did. But after participating in PD that focused on technology integration, I created a sample digital lesson and shared it with my team. I feel more empowered now.”* This transformation reflects how quality PD not only improves teaching skills but also empowers teachers as agents of change within their schools.

In summary, the interviews reinforced the questionnaire findings while providing nuanced accounts of how PD supports professional growth. Teachers viewed PD as instrumental in improving instruction, building confidence, fostering reflective habits, and strengthening collaboration. They valued PD not only for its content but also for the space it creates for interaction and leadership. These findings highlight the importance of reflective, context-sensitive PD that empowers teachers and promotes sustainable teaching improvement.

d. Challenges and suggestions for improvement

While the benefits of PD were widely acknowledged, both questionnaire and interview data revealed several ongoing challenges that impeded teachers’ full and effective engagement in PD. These challenges - related to time, resources, peer involvement, and institutional support - were consistently cited and offer essential insights into how current PD practices might be enhanced. One of the most frequently mentioned issues was the lack of time. Teachers repeatedly expressed that their heavy workload, including lesson planning, paperwork, and school duties, limited their ability to participate meaningfully in PD. *“We’re*

already overloaded with paperwork, lesson planning, and school events. Even when PD is useful, it's hard to give it our full attention" (Teacher B). This concern aligns with earlier findings regarding site-based PD and mentoring, which - though positively rated - were also noted as time-intensive activities. Teachers also highlighted the limited access to necessary resources, especially in rural or under-resourced contexts. Despite the high quantitative ratings for PD's contributions to professional knowledge ($M = 4.72$) and school development ($M = 4.56$), participants noted that the absence of teaching materials, updated documents, or technological tools often hindered the practical implementation of what they had learned. As Teacher F explained, *"Sometimes the PD content is good, but we don't have the equipment or materials to actually apply it. That gap makes it frustrating."* Another issue was inconsistent participation in PD activities. While some teachers were active and engaged, others showed low levels of involvement due to external obligations or discomfort with group-based learning. *"Not everyone in our department contributes equally. Some attend but don't share, and that affects the group dynamic"* (Teacher H). These dynamics particularly impacted collaborative models like CoPs and mentoring, which require mutual commitment to be effective.

A further concern was the lack of formal recognition for teachers who took leadership roles in PD. Some participants expressed disappointment that their efforts - such as mentoring colleagues or facilitating workshops - were treated as routine responsibilities without acknowledgment or reward. *"I led a PD session on integrating ICT in English classes, but it was treated like any other duty. There was no recognition, no feedback - just another task"* (Teacher D). This sentiment reflects the questionnaire's implication that institutional support for PD, while present, is not always fully appreciated or sustained. In terms of improvement, teachers offered clear and actionable suggestions. Many recommended making PD more flexible and better integrated into the academic calendar. Suggestions included modular training formats, shorter sessions, and activities scheduled during less demanding times of the school year. Another prominent recommendation was to increase teacher involvement in designing and selecting PD content. *"We want to be asked what we need - not just told what to do. If PD is based on what's really happening in our classrooms, we'll be more invested"* (Teacher G). This comment reflects a broader demand for teacher agency in shaping PD experiences. Teachers also called for stronger institutional backing. Beyond logistical support, they advocated for leadership that actively promotes collaboration, reflection, and innovation. Several participants proposed formal systems of acknowledgment for teachers who contribute to PD, such as certificates, incentives, or public recognition, to help build a culture where professional learning is valued and encouraged.

In summary, while teachers view PD as an essential element of their professional growth, its effectiveness is heavily influenced by the conditions under which it is delivered. Persistent challenges - including time constraints, resource shortages, uneven participation, and limited recognition - undermine its potential. However, teachers' clear and thoughtful suggestions point toward actionable reforms. By making PD more flexible, teacher-driven, and supported at both institutional and systemic levels, stakeholders can enhance the relevance, accessibility, and sustainability of PD in Vietnamese lower secondary schools.

4.2. Discussion

This study revealed that secondary EFL teachers in Dong Thap Province perceive PD not as a series of isolated or mandated training events but as a continuous, reflective process embedded in their daily teaching practice. The highest-rated survey item, "PD is a continuous, ongoing process", was consistently affirmed by interview participants, who described PD as part of their routine, often driven by personal initiative and informal learning from student feedback, peer exchanges, or online communities. This perspective aligns with international

literature emphasizing PD as a sustained, iterative cycle rooted in classroom realities (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017; Villegas-Reimers, 2003; Wei et al., 2010) and resonates with adult learning theories (Avalos, 2011; Kolb, 1984), which stress autonomy, relevance, and experience-based reflection.

Mentoring and coaching emerged as the most valued PD approaches across both datasets, scoring highest among strategy and model types. Teachers favored mentoring not only for its instructional support but also for its relational and emotional dimensions, particularly for early-career educators. One participant explained, *“My mentor didn’t just teach me techniques. She helped me believe in myself,”* illustrating how effective mentoring builds confidence, fosters professional identity, and encourages adaptive teaching. These findings resonate with Knight’s (2008) conceptualisation of instructional coaching as a partnership approach, where personalised feedback and collaborative dialogue promote lasting improvement. They also reflect the emphasis placed by Desimone (2009) and Darling-Hammond et al. (2017) on PD that is sustained, contextually relevant, and embedded in practice. While mentoring and coaching were highly valued, interviewees also noted constraints such as limited time and variable institutional support - barriers that echo challenges identified in previous Vietnamese studies (Nguyen & Dao, 2020; Pham & Hamid, 2013). Reflective practice was another consistently endorsed theme, with teachers describing how structured peer feedback and post-lesson reflection enabled them to refine instructional strategies and enhance student engagement. These results emphasize that teachers value PD fostering critical self-evaluation and experimentation - capacities essential for adapting to reforms such as Vietnam’s GEP 2018 (MoET, 2018). Collaboration, particularly through CoPs, was rated positively in the survey but revealed greater ambivalence in interviews. Teachers acknowledged the benefits of peer learning but described some meetings as ritualistic or constrained by hierarchy and time pressures. As one teacher remarked, *“Sometimes we meet just to check a box.”* Such comments suggest that while the principle of collaboration is widely accepted, its implementation often lacks authenticity and impact. This reflects challenges documented in both Vietnamese and broader Asian contexts, where professional hierarchies and compliance-driven cultures limit open peer dialogue. Addressing these barriers will require cultural change, leadership support, and targeted facilitation training to foster psychologically safe and productive collaborative environments.

Despite PD being widely regarded as essential for enhancing teaching quality and supporting school development, the study identified significant systemic constraints. Teachers described limited time, heavy workloads, inadequate follow-up, and lack of recognition as persistent obstacles. These challenges mirror international literature emphasising that PD must be sustained, coherent, and supported institutionally to be effective (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017; Desimone, 2009; Villegas-Reimers, 2003). In the Vietnamese context, similar concerns have been reported, with studies noting that teachers - particularly in rural settings - often face shortages of resources, limited opportunities for locally relevant PD, and heavy workloads that restrict their engagement (Nguyen & Dao, 2020; Pham & Hamid, 2013). Some participants reported leading PD sessions without receiving feedback or formal acknowledgment, raising concerns about sustainability and morale. While teachers expressed strong belief in PD’s potential to benefit students, they also recognized that its effects on learning outcomes are often indirect and gradual. The relatively lower score for the item *“PD directly improves student learning outcomes”* reflects realistic expectations consistent with Desimone’s (2009) framework, which posits that student achievement gains typically follow sustained changes in teacher practice. The interviews also revealed dimensions not captured in the survey. Many teachers demonstrated high levels of self-directed learning and agency, engaging proactively with online resources, translating professional readings, and initiating peer learning

opportunities. Others reported inequities in PD access, shortages of resources, and weak alignment between training content and real teaching needs. These insights reinforce the necessity of flexible, teacher-driven PD that respects professional autonomy and addresses practical constraints.

In sum, the findings suggest that for PD to be genuinely effective in the Vietnamese context, it must be reflective, context-sensitive, sustained, and built on professional trust. Mentoring, collaborative learning, and teacher agency should be actively supported not only through theoretical endorsement but also via concrete policy adjustments, workload management, and institutional recognition. A reimagined PD model - responsive to local realities and grounded in teacher voice - holds considerable potential for enhancing instructional quality and advancing educational reform goals across Vietnam's diverse secondary school settings.

5. Conclusion and implications

This study investigated EFL teachers' perceptions and practices of PD in lower secondary schools in Dong Thap Province, employing an explanatory sequential mixed-methods design. Drawing on data from 120 questionnaire responses and eight semi-structured interviews, the research provided a comprehensive account of how teachers conceptualize, engage with, and experience PD across both formal and informal settings. The findings revealed a strong consensus that PD is perceived as a continuous, reflective, and embedded element of professional life rather than a collection of externally mandated training events. Participants expressed clear preferences for personalized, context-sensitive strategies, with mentoring and coaching rated highest among both PD strategies and models. Reflective practice and collaboration were also identified as important components; however, the implementation of collaborative models such as CoPs was hindered by time constraints, irregular participation, and hierarchical school cultures.

The study also highlighted systemic challenges that limit PD effectiveness, including insufficient time, scarce resources, lack of formal recognition, and a misalignment between PD policy frameworks and classroom realities. Nonetheless, many teachers demonstrated strong self-directed engagement, proactively seeking learning opportunities beyond formal programs to enhance their professional competence. These findings carry important implications for the design and support of PD in Vietnam. Effective PD should prioritize teacher agency, contextual relevance, and sustained support mechanisms, particularly through mentoring and collaborative learning models. Policymakers and school leaders are encouraged to move beyond top-down, one-size-fits-all approaches toward systems that position teachers as active co-constructors of their professional learning. By embedding PD within daily teaching practices, creating structured spaces for reflection and dialogue, and ensuring institutional recognition and support, Vietnam can foster a sustainable, impactful professional learning culture that benefits both educators and students.

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