

# **An Investigation into Tertiary EFL Teachers' Needs for Professional Development**

Dau Duy Lich

Foreign Languages Department, Vinh University of Technology Education, Vinh city, Nghe An province, Vietnam

**Abstract:** It is widely admitted that what teacher-students of English learnt at university could not be satisfactory to them to go through their whole professional lives as they frequently deal with professional challenges as a result of changes in curricula, national tests, student needs, etc. This is the reason why EFL (English as a Foreign Language) teachers need to continually develop their profession. The aim of this study is to investigate what are tertiary EFL teachers' needs for professional development. Data was collected from in-service teachers of English at a college and a university in the central province of Nghe An, Vietnam utilizing a questionnaire. The results reveal that the participants gave a great prominence to three domains: knowledge of language, know of language teaching, and knowledge of language learners. They suggested these areas be continually developed throughout their teaching career. The results are supposed to be helpful in paving the way for more research into teachers' professional development. They would also be helpful in designing appropriate programs on teacher professional development.

**Index terms:** professional development, tertiary EFL teachers, needs

## **I. INTRODUCTION**

"Professional development, in a broad sense, refers to the development of a person in his or her professional role" (Villegas-Reimers, 2003, p.11). More specifically, "Teacher development is the professional growth a teacher achieves as a result of gaining increased experience and examining his or her teaching systematically" (Glatthorn, 1995, p.41).

Throughout teaching careers, teachers frequently deal with professional challenges as a result of changes in curricula, national tests, student needs, etc. However, it is widely admitted that what teacher-students learn at universities cannot be satisfactory for them to go through their whole professional lives. "Not everything teachers need to know can be provided at pre-service level, as well as the fact that the knowledge base of teaching constantly changes"

(Richards and Farrell, 2005, p.1). Moreover, the nature of professional knowledge seems to be a kind of transient knowledge (Meng & Tajaroensuk, 2013). In-service professional development is therefore crucial for all teachers. It creates “a significant positive impact on teachers’ beliefs and practices, students’ learning, and on the implementation of educational reforms” (Villegas-Reimers, 2003, p.19).

Because of its enormous significance, teacher professional development has been paid a lot of attention to by many nations. Singaporean government pays for 100 hours of professional development in addition to 20 hours a week for teachers to work with peers studying teaching; Sweden and the Netherlands require at least 120 hours of professional development per year beyond many hours spent on collegial planning and inquiry (Walqui, 2009). In Vietnam, tertiary teachers are obliged to spend around 160 hours a year to update new professional knowledge, to meet professional standards, and to improve teaching methodology, research and managerial abilities, professional and teacher qualities.

However, it is shown that teachers having participated in professional development programs had such problems as the limitation of programs, the discontinuity of programs, the inappropriateness of programs or not suitable professional development (Meng, Tajaroensuk, 2013).

The question being raised is that what teachers really need from professional development. The aim of this study is to investigate tertiary EFL teachers’ needs for professional development.

## II. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

### *A. Participants*

The participants for data of the study were 40 EFL teachers from two educational institutions. 8 of them are from Vinh University of Technology Education and the 32 others come from Nghe An Teachers Training College. The first group teaches English to non-English major students and the second group teaches English to both non-English major and English major students. The participants were chosen on the basis of purposiveness and availability.

### *B. Instrument*

A questionnaire adapting ETCF (Competency Framework for English Language Teachers: User’s Guide) is designed as an instrument for data collection. The questionnaire includes an open question and thirteen multiple choice questions belonging to three domains: knowledge of language, knowledge of language teaching, and knowledge of language learners.

### *C. Data collection and analysis*

The questionnaires were sent to all the 40 teachers for their responses. In the thirteen multiple-choice questions, the participants put a mark next to their relevant choice in a scale of five levels: extremely important, very important, quite important, somewhat important, and unimportant. The last question is an open one which is intended for the respondents to list anything else of their needs for professional development.

The questionnaires were then collected, and the statistical way was adopted for analyzing the data. For the thirteen multiple-choice questions, the responses were analyzed by frequencies for the levels of importance.

## III. RESULTS

After the questionnaires were collected, the data was analyzed, and the results were presented and interpreted in accordance with the domains to be questioned.

### *1. Knowledge of language*

This domain is composed of four questions representing four competencies in subject matter knowledge for English teaching: teachers' language proficiency, knowledge of the language system, understanding of how languages are learned, and cultures of English-speaking countries (ETCF, 2014, p.19).

Concerning teacher's language proficiency, the majority of participants (60%) thought that it was very important for teachers to continually develop the proficiency in the target language, that is C1 for tertiary teachers on the Common European Framework of Reference (CEF). 28 % thought it was extremely important, and the other 12% put a mark next to "Quite important". None of them chose "Somewhat important" or "Unimportant".

Similarly, for "Language as a system", which relates to English language sounds, word parts, word meanings and word order and how to teach the language system at the higher level, 26 teachers (65%) argued that it was very important to grow this proficiency throughout their teaching career. 10 others (25%) considered it to be extremely important and the 4 others "Quite important".

Question 3 is about "Understanding how languages are learned", referring to knowledge about how languages are learned to teachers' own language learning and to their teaching. 25 respondents (63%) pointed out that it was extremely important to them while 5 (13%) showed it was very important and the rest (10) indicated it was quite important. No one undervalued this proficiency.

More than half of the responses (55%) revealed that cultures of English-speaking countries were very important to the language teaching job. This competency describes the knowledge of target-language cultures demanded to be known and embedded by teachers into their teaching and examined in the light of Vietnamese culture for understanding and empathy. 5% responses valued it being extremely important and 40% quite important.

## *2. Knowledge of language teaching*

This domain “deals primarily with pedagogical content knowledge, including teaching the four skills, planning effective lessons, conducting effective lessons, creating supportive learning environments, assessing students’ progress and proficiency, and using resources and technology effectively to support student learning” (ETCF, 2014, p.19).

Question 5 deals with language teaching methodology, which looks at a variety of teaching strategies and techniques. This competency was highly measured as 27 of the 40 respondents marked it “Extremely important”, 12 others graded it as “Very important” and the one other “Quite important”.

The second factor of language teaching is lesson planning, which mentions the understanding of and ability to “plan effective lessons and design assignments and activities that address content, integrate skills, and help students to learn language forms and functions” (ETCF, 2014, p.25). The teachers who were asked to express their needs all greatly appreciated the necessity of lesson planning. 24 respondents evaluated it to be extremely important and the rest (16) assessed it as “Very important”.

The competency of conducting a lesson comprises question 7. It mentions the knowledge of “how to create a supportive, meaningful learning environment and carry out the lesson plan and manage classroom activities to give students language input, opportunities for negotiation of meaning, and meaningful interaction” (ETCF, 2014, p.25). This knowledge was the most appreciated by teachers because 31 of 40 participants considered it to be extremely important while the others chose “Very important” to be continuously progressed.

Question 8 is about assessment of language learning. It describes the understanding of formative (ongoing), and summative (progress and proficiency) assessment tools and techniques, and the ability to design and use age-appropriate assessments to inform instruction and to measure student progress and proficiency (ETCF, 2014, p.25). Almost all the teachers (36) agreed that it was very important for them to regularly update it while the 4 others thought it was quite important.

The next competency, namely “Resources”, specifies the ability “to use and adapt required textbooks effectively for language teaching and to locate and adapt materials and resources appropriate for students’ age and language level” (ETCF, 2014, p.25). The majority of the

participants (31) agreed on “Very important”, 3 “Extremely important” and 6 “Quite important”.

Technology such as computers was the most known to be very important (25 responses). 6 teachers considered it to be extremely important, and 9 found it quite important.

### *3. Knowledge of language learners*

This domain “relates to the knowledge of language learners. Teachers’ understanding of students’ development, stages of learner language, and prior learning experiences contribute to successful student learning. Understanding their students is also necessary as teachers help to develop students’ creativity and critical thinking - essential 21st century skills” (ETCF, 2014, p.19).

The first factor, namely teachers’ understanding of students’ development, constitutes question 11. Specifically, it means teachers’ understanding of learners’ cognitive and affective development and learning styles, and development of instructional practices that address and motivate diverse learners (ETCF, 2014). For this aspect, only one respondent thought it was extremely important while there were 27 respondents for “Very important”, and 12 for “Quite important”.

Regarding the second factor - recognizing learner language to inform instruction, which is defined as teachers’ recognizing the characteristics of developmental learner language and adapting their instruction and dealing with errors appropriately for students’ stage of development. Responding this question, 5 teachers judged it to be extremely important while half of the answers supported “Very important”, 9 and 6 supported “Quite important” and “Somewhat important” respectively.

Question 13 is made up of “Reflecting on learners’ values and prior learning”, that is reflecting on teachers’ own and their students’ cultural values and prior learning experiences and how they affect students’ language learning preferences and classroom behaviors (ETCF, 2014). “Very important” and “Quite important” each took up 16 responses, the 8 other responses were equally divided between “Extremely important” and “Somewhat important”.

The last feature of the domain “Knowledge of language learners” refers to developing learners’ creativity and critical thinking, which explains that “teachers practice creativity and critical thinking in their own language learning and teaching, and at appropriate developmental levels, help their students to develop creativity, and critical thinking skills” (ETCF, 2014, p.27). More than half of the respondents (22) backed up “Extremely important”, the 18 others were equally divided between “Very important” and “Quite important”.

For the open question “What other aspects do you need to develop during your teaching career and how important are they?”, while 37 participants gave no idea, the 3 others added some points. One of them put,

*“Differently important elements may be in need to develop my lecturing profession in which I need to improve my proficiency as well as method of teaching. For me these two factors are very important”.*

Another said,

*“Speaking naturally is important before developing the aspects of language such as: grammar, writing,... so that watching video, listening to the news can lead learners to begin with oral development”.*

While the other briefly stated,

*“Class sizes, students’ motivation, students’ attitude to their language learning”.*

Overall, for the 14 aspects of the three domains “knowledge of language”, “knowledge of teaching” and “knowledge of language learners”, although the participants showed different needs for different aspects, no feature was undervalued to be unimportant, even “somewhat important” choice was also rarely seen.

#### IV. DISCUSSION

According to the results presented above, tertiary EFL teachers’ needs for professional development relating to the three given domains are partly revealed.

##### *1. Knowledge of language*

The results indicated that all the respondents evaluated this area of knowledge to be at the three highest levels on the scale: quite, very and extremely important to their teaching profession. It is easily understandable why they showed that high evaluation of language knowledge as it is commonly known that “language is more than just the code: it also involves social practices of interpreting and making meanings”, and that “language is at the heart of language teaching and learning and teachers need to constantly reflect on what language is. This is because our understandings of language affect the ways we teach languages” (Angela Scarino *et al*, 2009).

Involving language and culture, understanding the nature of the relationship between language and culture is central to the process of learning another language. In actual language use, it is not the case that it is only the forms of language that convey meaning. It is language in its cultural context that creates meaning: creating and interpreting meaning is done within a

cultural framework. In language learning classrooms, learners need to engage with the ways in which context affects what is communicated and how. Both the learner's culture and the culture in which meaning is created or communicated have an influence on the ways in which possible meanings are understood. This context is not a single culture as both the target language and culture and the learner's own language and culture are simultaneously present and can be simultaneously engaged. Learning to communicate in an additional language involves developing an awareness of the ways in which culture interrelates with language whenever it is used (Liddicoat *et al*, 2003).

María Santos *et al* (2013) emphasized “teacher preparation and professional development programs will need to be designed to support the deeper content, performance and language demands expected of students. Consequently, the content, quality and delivery of professional learning opportunities will need to support teachers’ deeper understanding of content and mastery of instructional strategies that assist all students’ attainment of more rigorous standards” (María Santos *et al*, 2013, p.3).

## *2. Knowledge of language teaching*

Similarly to the evaluation of knowledge of language, a great prominence was given to knowledge of language teaching. Over 90% of the respondents put a mark next to “Extremely important” and “Very important” while no respondents favored “Somewhat important” or “Unimportant” in terms of the aspects of this domain. The participants had right thought because method is considered to be central to any language teaching enterprise. Additionally, it is strongly argued that “educators will need to understand the shifts required in curriculum, instruction and assessment for implementation of the new standards, and then they will need to have hands-on opportunities to acquire teaching strategies that respond to these shifts. These shifts in practice will rely on deep content knowledge that is pedagogical in nature. Educators will need to understand deeply the core areas of the disciplines and the learning progressions that operate within the domains of each discipline. They will also need to know a great deal about formative assessments to help them understand where students are in relation to the learning continuum, and they will need to have a variety of curriculum and instructional supports to respond to students’ needs in ways that produce deep learning” (María Santos *et al*, 2013, p.3).

## *3. Knowledge of language learners*

According to the survey results, almost half of the teachers thought that knowledge of learners was very or quite important to be regularly developed during their teaching job.

In Vietnam, there is a popular saying which generally means when we can understand ourselves and our collaborators, we can be successful in all work.

Angela Scarino *et al*, (2009) reason that our understandings of learning and learners are not simply acquired as knowledge that is put into practice; rather, they develop over time and in diverse contexts working with diverse students, based on ongoing experience and reflection.

## V. CONCLUSION

This study has been conducted on such rationales as the inappropriateness of programs or not suitable professional development so as to investigate tertiary EFL teachers' real needs for professional development. Its results are supposed to be helpful in partly paving the way for more research into teachers' professional development. They would also be helpful in designing appropriate programs on professional development so that EFL teachers will be gradually well-equipped for increasing demands of English language in an integrated world.

## REFERENCES

- [1] Aída Walqui (2009). *Professional Development for Teachers of Second Language Learners*. Earl Warren Institute on Race, Ethnicity, and Diversity UC Berkeley.
- [2] Angela Scarino et al, 2009. *Teaching and learning languages: A guide*. Australian Government – Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations.
- [3] Eleonora Villegas-Reimers (2003). *Teacher professional development: an international review of the literature*. UNESCO: International Institute for Educational Planning.
- [4] Glatthorn, a. 1995. "Teacher development" In: Anderson, L. (Ed.), *International encyclopedia of teaching and teacher education* (second edition). London: Pergamon Press.
- [5] Jack C. Richards, Thomas S.C. Farrell (2005). *Professional Development for Language Teachers – Strategies for Teacher Learning*. Cambridge University Press.
- [6] Junyi Meng, Songhorn Tajaroensuk (2013). *An Investigation of Tertiary EFL Teachers' Problems in Their In-service Professional Development*. Journal of Language Teaching and Research, Vol.4, No.6, pp.1356-1364.
- [7] Liddicoat et al, 2003. *Report on intercultural language learning*. Australia Government – Department of Education, Science and Training.
- [8] María Santos et al (2013). *Teacher Development to Support English Language Learners in the Context of Common Core State Standards*. Understanding Language, Stanford University School of Education.
- [9] National Foreign Language 2020 Project, 2013. *Competency Framework for English Language Teachers: User's Guide*. Vietnam National Institute for Educational Sciences, Ministry of Education and Training.

