COMMON PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT ACTIVITIES: PERCEPTIONS OF EFL TEACHERS AT SOME LOWER SECONDARY SCHOOLS IN HUE CITY

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Abstract: The study aims to explore EFL teachers' perceptions towards common professional development activities at some lower secondary schools in Hue city. A survey questionnaire was conducted to gain responses from fifty EFL teachers at different lower secondary schools in Hue city. The second instrument of interview was employed to qualify data obtained from the questionnaire, and participated by twenty teachers. The findings indicate that most EFL teachers had positive attitudes towards the necessity of common professional development (PD) activities and they had different opinions about the reality of practicing common PD activities at their lower secondary schools. Specially, team teaching activities, using peer observations were paid more attention to than the others. Frequent use of common PD activities such as keeping diaries or recording the lessons, participating in academic activities or engaging in discussion groups and mentoring activity was also reported. Furthermore, the study also shows that there were some factors hindering the practice of common PD activities such as lack of knowledge, lack of motivation, inadequate educational technology and lack of collaboration between EFL teachers and the main factor was lack of time.

Keywords: EFL teachers' perceptions, common PD activities

1. INTRODUCTION

The necessity for on-going teacher education has been a major issue in language teaching circles in recent years [19] The development of modern English language teaching approaches together with the integration of technology in language classroom has pressured EFL teachers into developing themselves in response to these changes. The importance of professional development (PD) for EFL teachers is then considered to be one of the key factors in maintaining and improving teachers' qualities as well as their students' achievements. As a result, many different tools of PD are being employed by EFL teachers such as reflective teaching, class observation, teacher collaboration, teaching journals and so on. So far, a great number of studies have been

conducted on English language teachers' PD in order to help them develop professionally, particularly to accumulate knowledge about successful practices and implementation of instructional strategies and technology in their classrooms [16]. However, how EFL teachers perceive and practice common PD activities at lower secondary schools remains little known. The purpose of this study therefore is to investigate in-depth common PD activities from the perspective of EFL teachers at some lower secondary schools in Hue city.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Professional development

The term professional development has been used in many contexts, in a sense it underlines the fact that teaching is a profession, thus, it is understood in different ways. In the context of English teaching, [23] defines PD as "a lifelong endeavour, a way of being, and a perspective on how one practices as well the practice itself". In other words, PD improves teachers' practices of working into a more professional level. Moreover, PD can be defined as "the engagement of individuals in any activity for the enhancement of their capacity at the workplace and to gain, improve and share a body of knowledge and skills that are relevant to perform particular duties in their workplace" [2]. Therefore, PD that aims at improving teachers' knowledge, skills, and attitudes [13] includes a full range of formal activities such as attending workshops, seminars, conferences, mentoring, etc. and informal experiences such as reading professional publications, watching television documentaries related to an academic discipline, etc. [9]. Hence, it has been increasingly recognized in recent years that both EFL and ESL teachers need PD [19].

2.2. Significance of professional development

PD plays an essential part in changing teachers' teaching methods; increasing teachers' prestige and those changes positively impact on students' learning [3, 4]. Similarly, [21] indicated that PD had a positive impact on teachers' belief and practices as well as on students' learning. In other words, PD had tremendous influences on teachers' goals in their teaching. Accordingly, EFL teachers need a comprehensive professional programme for all stages of their experience [6, 21] because their competence plays a significant part in their learning as well as teaching practice. They can learn new concepts, learn new skills, develop new attitudes, research, discuss and reflect on new ideas, try new approaches and integrate them into their practice [1, 22]. That is the reason why on-going PD should be highly appreciated in educational process and the more professional knowledge teachers have, the higher levels students achieve [8, 15].

2.3. Difficulties in practicing PD activities

There are a lot of activities that significantly foster their PD such as reflective teaching, collaboration/team teaching, participating in conferences/workshops/seminars, doing action research or mentoring activity. EFL teachers, therefore, may choose to organize or participate in either one or more of these because PD activities can be pursued either individually or collaboratively. However, not many teachers have a chance to get support from their administrators or go abroad to study for a degree or attend some academic activities such as workshops or seminars [18] to reach full potential of PD in order to improve their teaching process.

Another major obstacle is that allocation of time for PD activities in the process of teaching is scarce and limited. A specific example is that teachers tend to be burdened with heavy workload [18]. As a result, according to [10], teachers have consistently classified lack of time as the greatest challenge in implementing effective PD. In general, the lack of time can be regarded as a barrier in using PD tools actively [20].

The lack of information or knowledge can hinder teachers' professional development, especially their motivation. An obvious example is that [12] found significant relationship between the Internet and teacher development. In his study, he stated that sharing experiences through the Internet makes teachers concerned about the present and future condition of teaching and helps teachers develop teaching skills by providing new methodology as the Internet is a source of huge knowledge, it also enriches a teacher with lots of knowledge and skills. In addition, when they face any teaching problems, the Internet can introduce them with others who are also in problems. From that finding, it can be said that if teachers do not have enough knowledge or skills when they are teaching, their motivation will be decreased.

As professionals, EFL teachers should constantly develop themselves in order to cope with some factors such as the lack of time, knowledge and skills, financial support, teachers' network, information and training, heavy workload and lack of self-motivation hindering their professional growth.

3. THE STUDY

3.1. Purpose of the study

The current study aims to investigate EFL teachers' perceptions towards common PD activities at some lower secondary schools in Hue City in order to examine their attitudes, the reality and the difficulties in practicing common PD activities. The following research questions guide the study:

1. What are EFL teachers' perceptions of the necessity of common PD activities at some lower secondary schools?

2. What do EFL teachers do to practice their common PD activities?

3. What difficulties do they face in practicing common PD activities?

3.2. Participants and Settings

The participants in this study were fifty EFL teachers who are teaching English at some lower secondary schools in Hue city. The participants included six males (12%) and forty four females (88%). Among fifty participants, only one EFL teacher was from 25 to 29 years old (2%), fourteen of them were from 30-39 years old (28%). However, thirty five participants who were above 40 years old made up the highest percentage among the three age categories (70%). Especially, their English teaching experiences at lower secondary schools generally varied from 3 to 30 years. Moreover, more than half of the EFL teachers had BA degrees (78%) and there were only eleven EFL teachers (22%) who had MA degrees of English language teaching. Among them, about nearly half of the EFL teachers (46%) had not a chance to participate in common professional development activities as part of their job.

3.3. Research design & methodology

To meet the aims and objectives of the study it is important to select the most appropriate design for achieving the aims of the study [17]. Therefore, this study was designed as a descriptive one. A quantitative method and a qualitative one were combined in this study.

3.4. Research instruments

The questionnaire and the interview for teachers were used for data collection. Each of these instruments was used at different phases and for different purposes.

3.4.1. Questionnaire

The questionnaire was to collect information on attitudes, knowledge and experience of staff [17]. In this study, the questionnaire was administrated to provide more reliable information and was applied for collecting data on EFL teachers' perceptions towards the necessity of common PD activities; some common PD activities implemented in their teaching practice and difficulties in practicing common PD activities with a five-point Likert scale: (5) Strongly Agree, (4) Agree, (3) Neutral, (2) Disagree, and (1) Strongly Disagree. EFL teachers were asked to respond to the statements by ticking the provided boxes. Then the data were statistically analyzed by using Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) software version 22.

Based on the aims of the study, twenty five statements in the questionnaire were clustered as follows:

Table 1. *Summary of the questionnaire*

Name of clusters	Statements
EFL teachers' perceptions towards the necessity of common PD activities	1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6 and 7
Reality of practicing common PD activities	8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17, 18 and 19
Difficulties in practicing common PD activities	20, 21, 22, 23, 24 and 25

3.4.2. Interview

Apart from the questionnaire, the interview was also carried out in order to obtain more information collected from the questionnaire. It is essential that the main task in interviewing is to understand the meaning of what the interviewees say [14].

The four following questions aim to explore EFL teachers' responses their attitudes towards the necessity of common PD activities; some common PD activities implemented by EFL teachers and difficulties that they face in practicing common PD activities at some secondary schools in Hue city.

Question 1: What do you think about the necessity of common PD activities for EFL teachers at your lower secondary school?

Question 2: What do you think about the reality of conducting common PD activities at your lower secondary school?

Question 3: What difficulties do you face in implementing common PD activities to your lower secondary school?

3.5. Data Analysis

The data from the questionnaire were analyzed using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) software version 22 rated by five-point Likert scale: (5) Strongly agree; (4) Agree; (3) Neutral; (2) Disagree and (1) Strongly disagree, whereas the information from interviews was analysed into coded themes.

3.6. Procedure of the study

All the statements in the questionnaire were written in English and Vietnamese. The questionnaire and interview were developed by the researcher depending on the objectives of the study. Sixty one copies of the questionnaire were distributed, however, only fifty of them were chosen in the study. The rest was excluded because they were neither returned nor completed. Interviews with EFL teachers to collect more data for the study were also carried out.

3.7. Administering the questionnaire

To make sure that the participants understand all the statements and know how to respond to them, the researcher explained the tasks that would be asked to perform. However, the participants were not informed that how many people and who was given the questionnaire with the same format in order to ensure that the participants did not try to copy the questionnaire statements during the time for collecting data.

3.8. Administering the interview

The interview was given to twenty EFL teachers randomly chosen from fifty EFL teachers after completing the questionnaire about common PD activities. The researcher informed participants about the purpose of the interview and asked them to carefully

read questions before answering them. The participants were encouraged to response to the questions honestly and they could also ask any question they did not understand.

4. FINDINGS

4.1. EFL teachers' perceptions towards the necessity of common PD activities

EFL teachers' perceived level of agreement on the necessity of common PD activities summarized in Table 2 indicates that the majority of EFL teachers had quite positive responses to the necessity of common PD activities (M= 3.88). The maximum and minimum figures are 4.28 and 3.50 for statement Q5 and Q3 respectively. Likewise, the mean score of statement Q6 is not very high (M=3.60) in the comparison with the neutral scale 3 of the study. In addition, the mean score of statement Q4 and Q1 is 3.72 and 3.88 respectively. In addition, the table also illustrates the benefits of common PD activities. The mean score of agreement on the benefits of collaboration among teachers (M=4.12) and of team teaching which is one kind of common PD activities with M=4.08 is close to the high level of agreement scale of the study.

Table 2. *Descriptive statistic of EFL teachers' perceptions towards the necessity of common PD activities*

	MEAN	SD
PD fosters EFL teachers' responsibility in teaching and students' responsibility in learning. (Q1)	3.88	.849
PD increases collaboration among teachers as well as interaction between teachers and their students. (Q2)	4.12	.689
I have enough time to adapt a new teaching methodology to be appropriate to my students' level. (Q3)	3.50	.789
I feel satisfied with my current PD activities (peer observation) implemented to my classroom. (Q4)	3.72	.730
I am excited and motivated when having an opportunity to participate in formal or informal experiences related to teaching issues. (Q5)	4.28	.640
From my point of view, conducting action research continually is necessary for EFL teachers' professional growth. (Q6)	3.60	.904
I think team teaching is useful for EFL teachers in their teaching practice. (Q7)	4.08	.665
Total mean	**3.88**	

The data from the interview illustrate deeper insight into EFL teachers' perceptions towards the necessity of common PD activities to their skills, knowledge or expertise in teaching practice.

Most interviewed teachers highly evaluated the necessity and importance of common PD activities.

"In my opinion, practicing common PD activities is necessary."

(T1, T2, T3, T4, T5, T6, T7, T8, T9, T10, T11, T14, T15, T17, T18 and T19)

Moreover, two EFL teachers also recognized that the importance of practicing common PD activities to teachers' motivation and success in teaching English.

> "I think I will have higher motivation in teaching practice if I have a chance to professionally practice common PD activities." (T1)

> "Personally I believed common PD activities for EFL teachers is one of the factors that has a great influence on the success of teaching English." (T3)

Nevertheless, among twenty participants, there are four EFL teachers (T12, T13, T16 and T20) who argued that PD is not important to their teaching context. For example,

> "I think practicing common PD activities is not necessary and boosting EFL teachers' PD should not be compulsory because it conflicts with my work schedule."

> "It is not necessary, PD is just appropriate to EFL teachers at universities, not at lower secondary schools."

4.2. Reality of practicing common PD activities

In the questionnaire, the participants were asked to identify their practice of common PD activities. The responses are shown in Table 3. The results in Table 3 indicate that most participants have positive responses to all statements in this cluster. The statement Q17 is ranked the highest mean of all (M=4.60). The mean score of agreement on this statement is close to the highest level of agreement scale of the study. The second rank belongs to statement Q18 (M=4.46). Likewise, the mean scores of statements Q12, Q8, Q16, Q15 and Q18 reflecting "observe myself to enhance students' learning", "I analyse teaching practice after each lesson", "participating in academic activities", "I benefit from team teaching" and "I like sharing works and personal concerns" are perceived the high level of agreement from the participants with the mean score of 4.02, 4.06, 4.22, 4.36 and 4.46 respectively.

However, as shown in Table 3, the mean scores of Q9, Q10, Q11, Q18, Q13 and Q14 ranged from 3.82 to 3.96 are fairly lower than the level of agreement 4 among five-point scale. The data from Table 3 illustrate that EFL teachers tend to be available to listen to their colleagues' ideas, feelings or problems.

Table 3. *Descriptive statistic of reality in practicing common PD activities*

	MEAN	SD
After each lesson, I analyse my teaching practice to improve or change it for better outcomes and get development in my job. (Q8)	4.06	.620
Keeping a diary/journal helps me learn how to observe and assess my teaching practice as a teacher of English. (Q9)	3.92	.724
I tend to take advantages of my colleagues' feedback on PD activities to create a strategy for long-term growth for my current classes. (Q10)	3.94	.740
I often do action research in order to solve some teaching problems (students' passiveness, students' motivation, etc.) (Q11)	3.82	.800
I tend to observe myself in the process of teaching, from that, I seek ways to enhance my students' learning. (Q12)	4.02	.685

Peer observation is used to reflect what I need to improve (namely teaching methodology, how to interact with my students, etc.) in my future practice. (Q13)	3.90	.735
I really like engaging in discussion groups or educational e-forums (informal dialogues) with my colleagues to seek their advice on my strengths and weaknesses of PD activities when implementing to my classroom. (Q14)	3.96	.781
I benefit from team teaching activity by asking for their help, sharing my problems and finding out solutions. (Q15)	4.36	.598
Participating in academic activities (workshops, conferences and seminars) allows me to interact with other EFL teachers. (Q16)	4.22	.679
I am often available to listen to my colleagues' ideas, feelings or problems. (Q17)	4.60	.571
I like sharing work and personal concerns with my colleagues. (Q18)	4.46	.762
Mentoring activity can be seen as part of my formal arrangement at my secondary school to enhance my professional growth. (Q19)	3.88	.746
Total mean	**4.09**	

When being asked about the reality of practicing common PD activities at some lower secondary schools, EFL teachers were concerned with a wide range of different effective ways such as team teaching activities, using peer observations, keeping diaries or recording the lessons, participating in academic activities or engaging in discussion groups and mentoring activity.

Almost all the interviewees expressed that they often used peer observations, exchanged ideas and experiences as well as received feedback from their colleagues through team teaching activity. Eight participants (T6, T7, T8, T10, T11, T13, T15 and T20) in this study stated that team teaching was the most implemented.

> "In order to effectively implement PD activities, I have to have deep knowledge about those activities, then I will check my understanding through my colleagues and listen to their advice."
>
> (T6, T7 and T15)

> "As an English teacher, I tend to ask for help from my colleagues when I have to face some teaching problems. That is an effective way to help me know what I need to improve in my future practice."
>
> (T8, T10, T11, T13 and T20)

In addition, using peer observations was also perceived remarkable common PD activities by the interviewees. They expressed that they often used peer observations in their teaching practice (T3, T4, T7 and T20). They gave the reasons that using peer observations helped them reflect what they needed to improve when they were teaching.

They added that participating in workshops, seminars or conferences or engaging in discussion groups or educational e-forums is one of the most effective PD activities for EFL teachers. For example,

"I like participating in workshops, seminars or conferences related to my teaching issues." (T5, T11, T20)

"Engaging in discussion groups or educational e-forms with my colleagues is indispensable." (T17)

Furthermore, some EFL teachers applied common PD activities in different ways, such as keeping diary or recording their lesson.

"I really like analyzing my teaching practice after each lesson."

(T1 and T6)

"Keeping a diary or journals can help me learn how to observer and assess my teaching practices." (T17)

"I tend to observe myself and record the lesson in the process of teaching by using my phone."

(T7, T9, T18 and T19)

Although seventeen participants implemented common PD activities in reality, three participants seldom conducted common PD activities in the process of their teaching. They gave the reason that

"The time to complete all tasks in the textbook is inadequate." (T2)

"My weekly workload is always heavy." (T12)

"The time to conduct PD activities is restricted." (T14)

The opinions in the interviews showed that the teachers had different opinions about reality of practicing common PD activities at their lower secondary schools in the process of their teaching. Team teaching activities and using peer observations were paid more attention than the others. However, data from interviews revealed the results which were different from questionnaire data. Specifically, mentoring activity was a tool that was less employed.

4.3. Difficulties in practicing common PD activities

In the questionnaire, the participants were asked to identify the factors hindering their practice of common PD activities. The responses are showed in Table 4. In general, the result of the mean score indicates that most of the participants have negative responses towards all of the statements in this cluster. Statement Q24 is ranked the highest mean of all (M=2.70). This result means nearly all EFL teachers do not agree with this statements. The second rank belongs to statement Q23 with M=2.62. Likewise, the mean scores of statement Q20, Q21, Q22 and Q25 are low with M= 2.44, 2.34, 2.52 and 2.42 respectively. The results suggest that most of the respondents view lack of knowledge, educational technology, and lack of time or motivation as the most common factors that might hinder implementing common PD activities. Hence, it is concluded that the participants do not attain high level of agreement with all statements in this cluster. Moreover, the table illustrates that EFL teachers implemented their common PD activities with financial assistance from their administrators (not less). The mean score of agreement on this statement (M=2.70) is close to the neutral level of agreement scale of the study.

In conclusion, it can be inferred that when implementing common PD activities in their teaching practice, they encounter many difficulties such as lack of knowledge in effective teaching strategies, lack of time, lack of educational technology in their classroom, etc.

Table 4. *Descriptive statistics of difficulties in practicing common PD activities*

	MEAN	SD
I have sufficient knowledge in effective teaching strategies and in high-quality external expertise. (Q20)	2.44	.812
I have the time for taking part in a PD program although it conflicts with my work schedule. (Q21)	2.34	.717
I know how to motivate myself in practicing common PD activities. (Q22)	2.52	.839
I have a chance to interact with other teachers in sharing experiences to find out solutions. (Q23)	2.62	1.008
I have to implement common PD activities with less financial assistance from my administrator. (Q24)	2.70	.909
Educational technology is adequate in my classroom. (Q25)	2.42	.883
Total mean	**2.51**	

When the participants were asked about what difficulties that EFL teachers encounter in practicing common PD activities, they pointed out numerous factors including time, knowledge, self-motivation, financial assistance and technology. The main factor that was identified through interview data analysis was lack of time because they were always busy with their teaching schedule at their lower secondary schools. Most EFL teachers in the current study often reported that less time is an essential factor that might impede teachers' implementation of common PD activities. They expressed

> "I do not have time to implement PD activities in my process of teaching."

> (T1, T2, T8, T9, T15 and T18).

Furthermore, other factors that some of the interviews thought would hinder or prevent their application of common PD activities were lack of knowledge. They shared their ideas as follows:

> "I do not have sufficient knowledge in effective teaching strategies and in high quality external expertise at my lower secondary school."

> (T3, T8, T16 and T20).

Besides, four interviewed teachers stated that lack of motivation was one of the factors hindering their professional growth.

> "I do not know how to motivate myself in practicing common PD activities"

> (T4, T13, T14 and T17)

Another factor which may impede teachers' growth in language teaching is inadequate educational technology. They expressed that:

"Educational technology is not adequately equipped."

(T7 and T10)

Moreover, lack of collaboration between EFL teachers might be an obstacle to EFL teachers' implementation common PD activities.

"I do not have a chance to interact with my colleagues in order to ask for help and share some classroom problems."

(T3, T7, T9 and T12)

"Teachers at my lower secondary schools have different classes in a day, so I cannot find common time to work or share experiences together."

(T5 and T19)

However, only two EFL teachers (T6 and T11) did not agree with the opinion in the questionnaire: "They have to implement common PD activities with less financial assistance from their administrator" in the questionnaire. In other words, when implementing common PD activities, they received lots of financial assistance from their administrators when they were teaching as teachers of English at their lower secondary schools.

5. DISCUSSION

This research study aims to explore EFL teachers' perceptions towards common PD activities at some lower secondary schools in Hue city to examine their perceptions towards the necessity of common PD activities they use, reality and the difficulties in practicing common PD activities.

5.1. EFL teachers' perceptions towards the necessity of common PD activities

The results from the questionnaire revealed that participants had a quite high level of agreement on the necessity of common PD activities. The participants in this current study thought that they would be excited and motivated when they had a chance to participate in formal and informal experiences as well as team teaching that was very useful for their teaching in order to develop their ability. This finding corresponds with the point of view of [11] that EFL teachers had a very positive attitude towards PD namely discuss classroom experiences with other teachers.

The interview results were parallel to the results of the questionnaires. The data from the interview also revealed that EFL teachers had positive perceptions towards the necessity of common PD activities. It can be deduced from the interview data that the participants emphasized the importance of common PD activities in their teaching practice. One participant shared the ideas in her interview that "PD for EFL teachers is one of the factors that has a great influence on the success of teaching English". This matches with the finding of [5] that PD tools had a positive effect on their teaching practices.

5.2. Reality of practicing common PD activities

As for their reality of practicing common PD activities, the study revealed that most EFL teachers implemented common PD activities in their teaching practice. Specially, they highly appreciated significant benefits of listening to colleagues' ideas, sharing work and personal concerns with their colleagues, team teaching, participating in academic activities, analyzing their teaching practice after each lesson and observing themselves. Additionally, engaging in discussion groups, keeping diary or journal, using peer observations, mentoring activity and doing action research were activities which were less frequently than others.

From the interview data, the participants were found to share their work and personal concerns with their colleagues as well as join in some academic activities such as workshops, seminars or conferences related to their teaching issues. This finding was in harmony with the viewpoint of [7] that the majority of participants recognized the significance and benefits of workshops for their PD. A few of the participants rarely apply common PD activities to their teaching because it conflicted with their work schedule.

5.3. Difficulties in practicing common PD activities

The most common challenges EFL teachers mentioned from the questionnaire with regard to practicing common PD activities related to their regular heavy workload, lack of self-motivation and lack of collaboration among other EFL teachers. Besides, inadequate educational technology may impede the application common PD activities.

However, from the interview data, lack of knowledge of effective teaching strategies and lack of time to participate in a PD program were the main factors preventing their PD. This matches with the finding by [18] that teachers tended to be burdened with heavy workload. This is also in harmony with [10]'s viewpoint that teachers had consistently classified lack of time as the greatest challenge in implementing effective PD and [12]'s findings that there was a significant relationship between the Internet and teacher development. In discussion of "financial assistance", all EFL teachers did not agree with the opinion that "they have to implement common PD activities with less financial assistance". Consequently, there is no doubt that as teachers of English, they should have enough knowledge and skills and know how to motivate themselves in order to develop their professional growth.

6. CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The purpose of the study is to investigate the attitudes of EFL teachers towards the necessity of common PD activities at some lower secondary schools in Hue city and to explore the reality of practicing common PD activities as well as to gain insight into difficulties in implementing common PD activities. To ensure that EFL teachers will engage in common PD activities, schools should encourage teachers to voluntarily pursue common PD activities, and introduce them to PD training programs on an organized basis. In addition, PD activities should be dealt with every semester inside and outside language classrooms for the benefit of EFL teachers' PD as well as

students' learning in the whole school. Further studies should focus on other aspects of PD such as the effectiveness of each PD activity and lifelong PD.

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