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Original Article

Effectiveness of Formal Professional Development Activities in Vietnam: What Affects English-as-Foreign-Language Lecturers' Perceptions

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Abstract: In the era of constant innovation in English language education, teacher professional development is of critical importance as it possibly contributes to changes in teachers' attitudes and practices as well as changes in teaching and learning outcomes. Given this perspective, a vast number of teacher professional development activities have been provided by administrative levels in Vietnam with a hope that teachers' capacities will be enhanced for better teaching and learning. However, how effective these formal teacher professional development activities are might be perceived differently by the stakeholders. The present study aims to investigate how English-as-foreign-language lecturers perceive the effectiveness of the formal professional development activities provided for them and the reasons for their perceptions. The study employed the qualitative approach in which the data were collected via interviews with fourteen teachers from different universities. The findings showed that the provided professional development activities were effective to a certain extent as perceived by the participant English-as-foreign-language lecturers. Their perceptions were affected by the elements of professional development activities, the coherence between specific elements of the professional development activities and the lecturers' personal context or social context. The research findings possibly inform English-as-foreign-language lecturers, institution managers and professional development organizers in Vietnam and comparable contexts about how to maximize the effectiveness of formal teacher professional development activities.

Keywords: Formal professional development, teacher perception, English-as-foreign-language lecturers.

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1. Introduction

A variety of studies on different teacher professional development activities such as training [1, 2], mentoring [3] professional learning community [4], team-teaching [5], and online learning modes [6] have been conducted to examine its effectiveness in specific contexts. Such evaluation of the teacher professional development activities was mostly conducted via observations of and follow-up interviews with the participants. The present study focused on the voice of English-as-foreign-language lecturers who have been constantly provided with courses or workshops on the subject matters or teaching methods and/or other education-related topics as well as with conferences or seminars where they can present their research results or discuss educational issues. These professional development activities were under investigation as they are formally structured and/or institutionally mandated, which are obligatorily required during the lecturer's career path. Whether a formal professional development activity is effective to participating lecturers is a crucial question, the answer to which is considered to be associated with professional development quality enhancement. In particular, the study investigated English-as-foreign-language lecturers' perceptions of formal professional development activity effectiveness and the factors which may affect their perceptions by means of semi-structured interviews in relation to elements of professional development activities, personal and social context in which professional development activities are situated. The study sought to answer two questions:

i) How effective are the formal professional development activities as perceived by English-as-foreign-language lecturers?

ii) What affects English-as-foreign-language lecturers' perceptions of the formal professional development activities?

2. Literature Review

2.1. Effectiveness of Professional Development Activities

Professional development activities can be collaboratively or individually undertaken [7-10] formally or informally organized [10] [11]. Particularly, professional development activities can be in the form of workshops, teacher support groups, team teaching, peer observation, peer coaching, analyzing critical incidents, case analysis, action research, self-monitoring, and keeping a teaching journal [9] initial training, induction courses, and in-service training [12], university-school partnership, project-based models, reflective models, teachers' narratives [10].

Noticeably, whatever form a professional development activity is, it aims to improve teacher quality for better teaching and learning. This aim, as a core element of a professional development activity, is affirmed in numerous studies. For example, professional development is defined as "the ability to move teachers toward a more professional stance in their contributions and understandings as future practicing teachers" [13]. Likewise, Avalos [7] and Vonk [14] describe professional development by emphasizing the improvement of teacher capacity, and the authors clarify what teachers can gain from a professional development process: skills, professional knowledge [15], values and personal qualities that enable teachers to continually adapt within the educational system" [15]. Guskey adds improving their students' learning outcomes as a result of increasing teacher competence [16]. Meanwhile, according to Kubanyiova, professional development is "the process whereby teachers come to alter aspects of their cognition and practices in response to their encounter with new input". By defining professional development this way, the author identifies another element of professional development - that is, "new input", or what to be provided [17].

The elements of what to gain and what to be provided are also present in the conceptual framework proposed by Desimone for studying the effects of professional development on teachers and students (Figure 1) [18]. Specifically, what to gain from professional development involves increased teacher knowledge, and skills, change in attitudes and beliefs, change in instruction, and improved student learning. While Kubanyiova [17] only mentions "new input as what to be provided, inDesimone's framework [18], this element involves content focus (i.e., professional development activities focus on the subject matter content and how students learn that content), active learning (i.e., professional development activities provide opportunities for teachers to engage in the development process), coherence (i.e., the consistency of institutional and/or national requirements with professional development objectives, and of those objectives with teachers' professional needs), duration (i.e., the time span of a professional development activity and the real contact time among teachers and/or the stakeholders), and collective participation (i.e., professional development activities provide opportunities for teachers to work with their colleagues during the process).

Another element of a professional development activity, which is no less significant to the activity quality, is the facilitator who possibly promotes teacher learning [18-21]. Lipowsky even specifies a number of characteristics of the facilitator, including knowledge, belief, enthusiasm, interests, and communication skills [20].
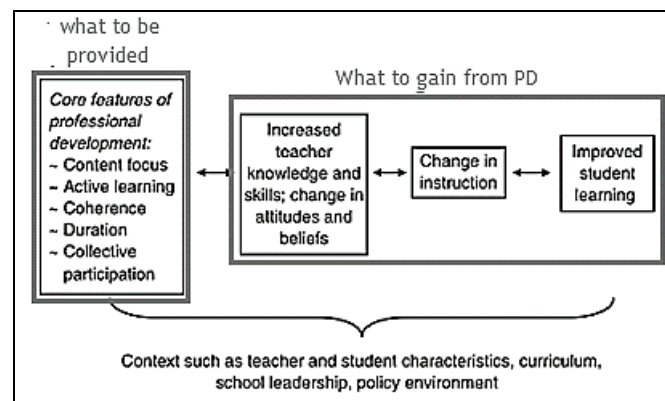

Figure 1. Desimone's conceptual framework for studying the effects on professional development on teachers and students [18].

Moreover, as shown in Figure 1, Desimone [18] not only clarifies elements of a professional development activity but also postulates that these elements are under the influence of context, either personal context of individual teachers (i.e., teacher characteristics) or social context (i.e., student characteristics, curriculum, school leadership, and policy environment). This view is in line with that of Avalos [7], Borko [19], Borko et al., [20], Lipowsky [21], and Lipowsky and Rzejak [22] in that any single form of professional development is culturally and experience sensitive and should be adapted to specific educational needs and settings. Lipowsky lists out a number of teacher characteristics: prior knowledge, skills, motivation, beliefs, and self-efficacy [20]. Sancar et al., in a review of professional development frameworks, categorizes teacher characteristics into teachers' professional features and teachers' individual features (pp. 5) [15]. Teachers' professional features include "professional experience, attitude, anxiety, perspective, commitment, competence, knowledge/skills, identity, leadership, value, motivation, belief,

request, satisfaction, self- efficacy, and confidence" (pp. 5). Meanwhile, teachers' individual features include "their unique requirements, preferences, and skills (e.g., language use skills and higher-order thinking skills such as questioning, reflective thinking, and critical thinking)" (pp. 6) [15].

It is indicated from the literature that the effectiveness of a professional development activity is usually concluded based on its appropriate characteristics [7, 14, 16, 18, 21]. In other words, there seems to be no fixed definitions of "effectiveness" in professional development research. Cambridge Online Dictionary defines "effective" as "achieving results that you want". Accordingly, "effectiveness of professional development activities" can be understood as obtaining the results or objectives predetermined by the organizers of the professional development activities. However, the objectives of a

professional development activity may not be satisfied merely by means of the professional development activity itself because it can be impacted by several contextual factors [15, 16, 18, 21].

All in all, the effectiveness of a professional development activity (Figure 2) is likely to be determined by its elements (i.e., professional development objectives, content focus, opportunities for active learning, coherence, duration, opportunities for collective participation, and facilitators) and contexts (i.e., personal and social contexts). In the present study, the elements and contexts of the formal professional development activities are investigated through the participant teachers' observations and experiences, whereby the effectiveness of the formal professional development activities as well as the factors affecting teachers' perceptions of professional development effectiveness are revealed.
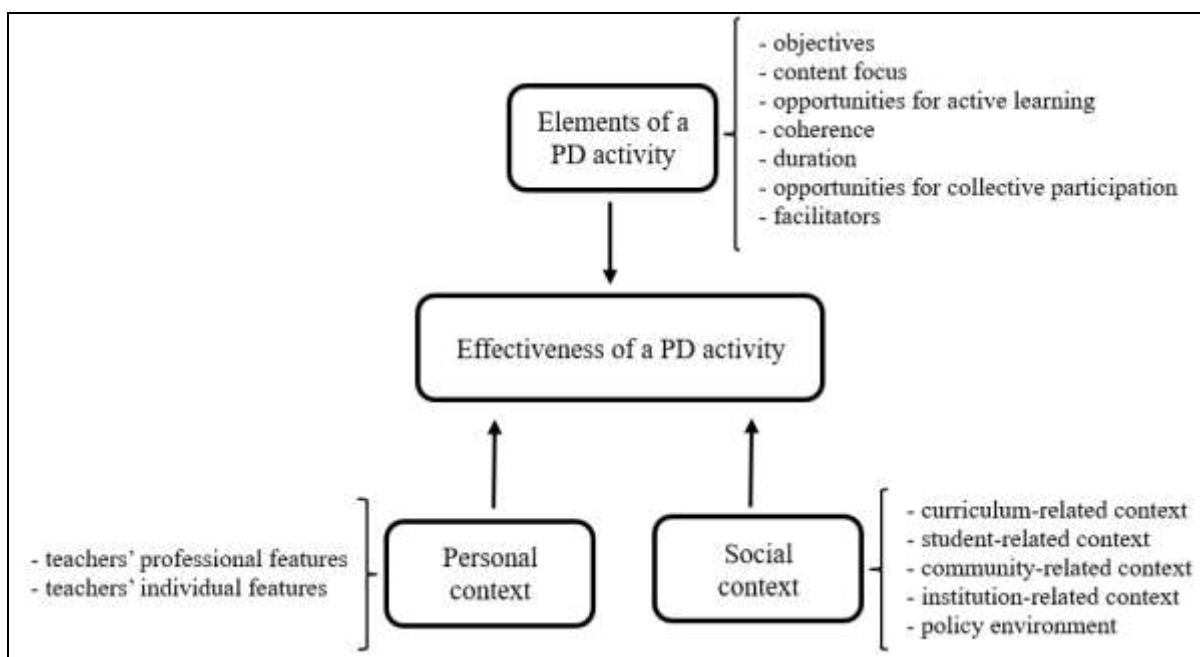

Figure 2. Effectiveness of a professional development activity.

2.2. Research on Formal Professional Development Effectiveness

Professional development effectiveness, in numerous research, is normally determined by

objective fulfillment [16, 21-27]. However, the effectiveness of a professional development activity can be perceived through the other elements - that is, content focus, opportunities

for active learning, coherence, duration, opportunities for collective participation, and facilitators [18, 22, 28], as well as the interaction between those elements and the variables attributed to a professional development activity, namely personal and social context [30-34]. These patterns of research on professional development effectiveness are applicable to research on formal professional development activities.

It is revealed that formal professional development activities (i.e., workshops/professional meetings, masterclasses, courses, or formal peer coaching/mentoring) have more sustainable impact when they are embedded at the school level. Specifically, time scheduled for professional learning [35], quality of support and guidance of learning processes [35, 36], availability of resources and support and management support and educational leadership [35-38] help promote effective learning among the teachers. To put it differently, the organizational conditions are associated with formal professional development effectiveness. King [36] and Rosen [37] also emphasizes the importance of collaborative nature of the teachers who bring the professional development initiative into practice or of the teacher leaders who are in charge of other teachers' professional development in their schools. According to King, these teachers' collaboration leads to sustainability of new practices [37]. Likewise, according to Rosen, by attending monthly professional meetings organized by the district, the teacher leaders can cooperate with each other in generating ideas on how to deal with obstacles they experience and creating strategies to facilitate professional development at the school level [36]. This finding reflects one element of a professional development activity (i.e., opportunities for collective participation).

Noticeably, the collaboration among the teachers in these studies is witnessed not only during the professional development processes but also afterwards, indicating the necessity of follow-up activities to boost up the effect of the professional development processes. In another context, Farakish et al. proves the positive impact of integrating workshops with the other supportive activities [39]. In particular, the task force sends a professional toolbox (i.e., pedagogical tips, tools, and resources with corresponding links and attachments) to the teachers, gets them to access a learning management website, and invites them to a series of workshops. In doing so, the teachers have opportunities to see, hear, and discuss the provided professional materials at least three times. Most of the teacher participants in Farakish et al., research admit the benefits gained from the professional development program except for a few who cannot employ all of the program resources due to their time constraints [39]. These teachers share that they can learn at least two or three things for their classroom practice and that they are satisfied with how the facilitator models the theoretical issues (pp. 121-122). Experiencing the pedagogical strategies, techniques, and the use of tools as learners may facilitate the teachers' better understanding and application. The importance of experienced and efficient professional development organizers and facilitators to professional development success is also proved by Sarwar et al. when these authors compare the effectiveness of two professional development phases (pp. 17) [40]. Meanwhile, Menges shows that the interplay between the personal context (i.e., teacher personality - individual feature) and an element of the professional development activity (i.e., mentors - professional development providers) contributes to professional development success [41]. Specifically, the similarities in specific personality characteristics of mentors and mentees affect the support mentees receive from mentors (pp. 17). For example, mentees low in openness receive more support from mentors who also score low in openness than from mentors who score high in openness. Similarly, mentees high in openness receive more support from mentors who also score high in openness than from mentors who score low in openness (pp. 14) [41].

Besides uncovering the importance of organizational conditions and collaborative nature, in other words, how social context is attributed to professional development success, King realizes that teacher agency (i.e., teachers' openness and willingness, motivation, and deep learning) is essential for the change process (pp. 13) [37]. It means that if teachers are willing and/or motivated to engage with what is provided in a professional development activity, they are more likely to dig into the new input and put it into practice. Simultaneously, whether they can successfully adapt to a new practice depends on how able they are to acquire and apply what is provided. To put it another way, teachers' professional and individual features have a role to play in enhancing professional development effectiveness. This view is supported by Sarwar et al., [40] and Kennedy [42] who suggest that effective professional development should focus on specific problems faced by teachers rather than pedagogic theory. In essence, these authors advocates a problem-solving approach related to teachers' needs for actual classroom practice. Sarwar et al., point out the training module on research methods and skills is the least in its effectiveness as the majority of the teachers are more concerned about teaching than being involved in classroom research. As a result of their major concern, they do not realize the need of this module which is reported to be less effective (pp. 18) [40].

3. Research Methodology

3.1. Context and Participants

Professional development plays an important role in maintaining and improving teachers' qualities and competences; therefore, it has attracted various stakeholders' attention in many countries, including Vietnam. In recent years, a considerable number of professional development activities, namely professional courses, workshops, seminars, and conferences, have been organized inside and outside universities across the country, with a wide range of topics such as teaching techniques, technology integrated teaching, testing and assessment, researching and publishing. As a matter of fact, a large number of universities require their English-as-foreign-language lecturers to accumulate hours of professional development every year, including hours of participating in compulsory courses or workshops held by the university and hours of attending or presenting in national or international conferences in the field. However, it is concerned whether lecturers perceive those formal professional development activities as effective and what could be done to maximize their effectiveness.

With the aim of investigating Vietnamese English - as - foreign - language lecturers' perceptions of the effectiveness of formal professional development activities and the factors affecting their perceptions, the present study adopted the qualitative approach. Fourteen lecturers were purposefully selected as the participants of the study. This selection strategy follows Patton who emphasizes that "qualitative inquiry typically focuses in depth on relatively small samples, even single cases, selected for a quite specific purpose" (pp. 264) [43]. In specific, the participants were selected from different universities in the North, Middle, and South of Vietnam and based on the criteria of qualifications, years of teaching and experience, and students' majors. One concern about the participant selection might be whether they could represent the perceptions of numerous English-as-foreign-language lecturers in Vietnam. However, the study's concern was not representative views by typical English-as-foreign-language teachers in the population but the voices of the individuals who had specific experiences in their contexts. In essence, the participant selection strategy for this study ensured accessing appropriate data that "fit the purpose of the study, the resources available, the questions being asked, and the constraints being faced" (pp. 308) [43]. The information about the teacher participants is provided in the following table.

Table 1. Participant profile

Participant	University/ Location	Qualifications	Years of teaching experience	Students' characteristics
Teacher 01**	U01*** North	M.A. (Ph.D. student)	Above 15 years	English-majored
Teacher 02**	U02*** South	M.A.	Above 10 years	English-majored
Teacher 03**	U03*** Middle	M.A.	Above 10 years	Non-English-majored (early teaching years) & English-majored (later teaching years)
Teacher 04**	U04*** North	M.A.	Above 15 years	English-majored
Teacher 05**	U05*** North	M.A.	Above 15 years	Non-English-majored
Teacher 06**	U06*** North	M.A.	Less than 5 years	Non-English-majored
Teacher 07**	U07*** North	Ph.D.	Above 10 years	English-majored
Teacher 08**	U07*** North	Ph.D.	Above 15 years	English-majored
Teacher 09**	U08*** North	M.A.	Above 15 years	Non-English-majored
Teacher 10**	U08*** North	Ph.D.	Above 15 years	Non-English-majored
Teacher 11**	U07*** North	M.A.	Above 10 years	Non-English-majored
Teacher 12**	U07*** North	M.A.	Above 5 years	English-majored & Non-English-majored
Teacher 13**	U09*** North	B.A.	Above 5 years	English-majored
Teacher 14**	U10*** Middle	M.A.	Above 5 years	English-majored & Non-English-majored

Note: ** pseudo names of the participant teachers;
*** pseudo names of the universities where the participants work;
M.A.: Master of Arts Degree; Ph.D.: Doctor of Philosophy Degree.

3.2. Data Collection and Analysis

A semi-structured interview scheme was designed upon the elements presented in Figure 2, including the elements of a professional development activity, personal context, and social context by one member of the research team. Then the other members reviewed and revised it before bringing it into use. The interview scheme consisted of four major parts, including participants' reasons for and experiences with formal professional development activities, evaluation of their own changes after professional development participation, and perceptions of the factors influencing professional development effectiveness.

Before the interviews, all of the participants were provided with the consent form before each interview to contemplate the approval of interview participation and the guiding interview questions to give them more time to deliberate ideas. To assure the quality of the interviews, the time and platform of each interview were negotiated with each interviewee, and the interviews were done in Vietnamese so that participants could freely express themselves in their home language. Due to different working schedules and resident areas, all interviews were conducted through Zoom sessions and videotaped with the participants' approval. Each interview lasted approximately 40 minutes.

After the data were collected, all members of the research team were arranged for transcribing, translating, and code generating. First, keywords in relation to the elements of a professional development activities, personal context, and social context were sought through the data. Then, keywords showing the teachers' perceptions of professional development effectiveness as well as its relation to the aforementioned elements and contexts were also searched. From these keywords and their relation, the findings about individual teachers as well as the patterns of similar and different views were induced. This analysis strategy was informed by the purpose of the study which focused on exploring English-as-foreign-language lecturers' perceptions and the factors affecting their perceptions. It also reflects Patton's view that "purpose drives design" (pp. 526) [43]. Specifically, "patterns and themes that cut across the diversity of participants" can be found such in a group of participants who are selected for specific and rich information (pp. 528) as in the present study. Moreover, in order to "overcome the skepticism" of the research credibility, analyst triangulation was employed, in which more than one analyst looked at the same set of data independently and then negotiated the agreement on the codes and findings (pp. 1193) [44].

4. Research Findings and Discussion

4.1. English-as-foreign-language Lecturers' Perceptions of the Effectiveness of Formal Professional Development Activities

This section reports how English-as-foreign-language teachers from a variety of universities in Vietnam perceive the effectiveness of formal courses/workshops and conferences/seminars. Three out of fourteen teacher participants expressed their satisfaction about any courses/workshops and conferences/seminars they attended. They stated that each of those activities was effective in a certain way. For example, Teacher 01 said that she learned various things from those professional development activities, including soft skills, self-study skills, time management, new ways of exploiting teaching materials and new ideas of teaching, as well as new beliefs and values regarding overviews of a professional issue even though the content is not completely new. Teacher 08 also confirmed the effectiveness of formal professional development activities. To be more specific, she claimed that:

"… For me, professional development activities are always effective, more or less,… For example, when I attend a course, it is not only about learning contents of the course for my immediate use but also about changing myself,… Sometimes I attended a course which

seemed unrelated to my job - teaching English - but what I learnt from the course changed my attitude, and as my attitude changed, the way I approached my teaching job and my students changed, too".

Another teacher who considered most professional development activities as effective is Teacher 07. She stated that attending courses and workshops is the most effective professional development activity. She mentioned attending various courses like the VIBE course by the Irish Embassy or the E-learning course by Michigan University sponsored by the US Embassy, all of which were highly effective to her. These activities could open opportunities for her to widen her professional network.

Meanwhile, other teacher participants claimed that not all of the courses/workshops and conferences/seminars they attended were effective. For example, Teachers 03 and 11 said that, for many times, they found a professional development activity quite interesting and effective when they were attending it, but the sense of effectiveness did not last for long after the activity ended. Teacher 03 even added that "there has hardly been a connection between the given formal professional development activities. After the courses, workshops or conferences end, there seems to be no follow-up activities to connect the professional communities".

Also, for some interviewees, the effectiveness of a formal professional development activity also changed across time, particularly in accordance with their career stages. For example, Teacher 09 considered courses, workshops or conferences about teaching methods and techniques quite useful and effective when she was a novice teacher. However, as she became an experienced teacher and especially after she completed her PhD program, she considered those activities less effective. At that later stage, she found conferences and workshops about scientific research and international publications much more effective.

Although teachers' perceptions of professional development effectiveness varied, they could more or less benefit from these given professional development activities. Besides gaining professional skills for their job, the participating teachers could obtain certain soft skills. To be more specific, Teachers 02, 03 and 05 improved their knowledge and skills in the field of testing and assessment thanks to attending some courses. Likewise, Teacher 10 mentioned her development in researching skills and ESP teaching techniques. Some soft skills developed from courses or workshops include planning skills (Teachers 01 and 07), problem-solving skills (05), and time management (Teachers 01 and 08).

4.2. Factors Affecting English-as-Foreign-Language Lecturers' Perceptions

The English-as-foreign-language lecturers' perceptions regarding the effectiveness of formal professional development activities were influenced by the activity features, personal context, social context, and the interaction among these factors, although these influencing factors were not consistent among the participants.

It is clear from the data that the professional development content was of great importance to influence many of the participants' evaluation of the course/workshop or the conference/seminar they attended. For example, Teacher 05 found it ineffective to participate in a theory-based conference which introduced general knowledge in the field. Teacher 06 expressed the same idea; she even emphasized that such a professional development activity was "a waste of time". Meanwhile, a course/workshop that was "rich in new information and encouraged learners to explore further" (Teacher 03) or included "new, logical and accurate content with clear sources to check later" (Teacher 12) was highly appreciated. In essence, the input quality is proved to play a significant role in determining the professional development activity effectiveness. This finding was consistent with those by Kubanyiova [17] and Desimone [18]. Moreover, the

aforementioned ideas from the participants show that teachers' professional development evaluation was affected by their belief or preference of what a professional development activity should be like. In other words, teacher perceptions were influenced by their own individual [15]. This influential factor was evident in the majority of the interviewees (13/14) who admitted that the relevance between the content of the professional development activity and their own interests was recognized as an indicator of professional development effectiveness. To be more specific, Teacher 01 stated that "when the content [of the professional development activities] is relevant with my purpose, I often deliberately choose to attend those activities, which usually brings about more effective outcomes." That was the reason why she was normally pleased with the short courses organized by IDP, Macmillan, IIG or British Council that offer her overviews as well as new ideas rather than those annually organized by her institution. Similarly, Teacher 08, though satisfied with whatever professional development activity she participated in, found a formal professional development activity most effective if it matched her priority in a certain period of time. Teacher 02 was in agreement with Teachers 01 and 08, emphasizing that "if the content is related to my personal interests, needed for my job or linked with theoretical backgrounds for my academic research, then it [the professional development activity] is often effective".

The next activity feature that influences the teachers' perception of professional development effectiveness is the quality of the professional development facilitator or trainer. Evidently, even though three interviewees considered facilitators as an uninfluential factor, eleven of them showed their appreciation for this aspect in their answers. Specifically, professional development trainers or facilitators were expected to be really good in terms of professionalism and work experience because only with qualified trainers/facilitators can a course meet the demand of the participants. For

example, Teacher 02 noted that he experienced a change of viewpoint about his professional development pathway thanks to the guiding conversations he had with good trainers such as an American teacher in Japan or a Vietnamese teacher in an E-learning workshop. Teachers 03 and 09 mentioned facilitators as an influential factor to their perceptions of professional development activity effectiveness as they often learn the course delivery method from those facilitators and directly apply those lessons into their teaching context. Teacher 12 clarified that "if the facilitator is a brilliant expert, I will feel that the course is great. If the facilitator doesn't have in-depth knowledge about the topic, it will definitely affect my enthusiasm to participate in the course." However, the requirements of trainer/facilitator qualities seemed to vary among the participants. While some teachers expected trainers/facilitators to be highly knowledgeable (Teachers 02, 06, 10, 12, and 14), others wanted trainers/facilitators to be skillful in delivering the lessons (Teachers 03, 09, 10, 12, 13, and 14) or inspiring and enthusiastic (Teacher 11). The finding about the influence of trainers/facilitators on the teachers' perception was in line with what Avalos [7], Borko [19], (2010), Lipowsky [20], Lipowsky and Rzejak [21], and Borko et al., [22] proposed. Nonetheless, a new finding here is that teachers' preferences or unique requirements can determine which qualities of trainers/facilitators are more significant to them. This reflects the influence of the individual features on their perception [15].

Not only teachers' individual features (i.e., unique requirements and preferences) but teachers' professional features also affect their perception of professional development effectiveness. This finding is in line with the view by Lipowsky [20] and Sancar et al., [15] who emphasize the importance of teachers' professional features in the success of a professional development activity. In fact, not all of the professional features mentioned by these authors were found in the present study. To be more specific, when the teachers were well aware of their needs (Teachers 02, 04,

and 14), developed their identity (Teachers 02, 08, and 10), or had positive and responsible attitude toward what was provided to them (Teachers 01 and 08), they seemed to better identify the effective aspects of the formal professional development activities they attended. As Teacher 2 shared, the theory session in a conference might be relevant and more useful for university teachers. He stated:

"University teachers normally need more theories which serve as a foundation for identifying or guiding their research directions rather than focus on specific teaching techniques. Conferences which provide theoretical conceptualization seem to be more useful. Sometimes, university teachers also need to learn about teaching methodology, but a conference session which just focuses on a specific classroom situation seems to be irrelevant as the participants cannot really use it afterwards".

The above quote shows that Teacher 02 was well aware of his needs as well as his identity as a university teacher. While some young teachers did not want to attend theory sessions (Teachers 05 and 06), Teacher 02 showed his appreciation for the theories provided in the workshops or conferences. Similarly, professional needs as well as identity affect the perception of Teachers 08 and 10. Teacher 10 mentioned a change in her sense of effectiveness in different professional development activities as she developed as a teacher. She stated that she found workshops and courses about teaching techniques really efficient when she was a novice teacher but then found those activities less effective when she became an experienced teacher and earned her PhD degree. At the later stage, she paid more attention to developing researching skills and widening her professional networks; therefore, she found workshops, courses and conferences on doing scientific research and authoring international publications more effective. Teacher 08 also shared that her professional development focus might change in different periods of time and that she was more attentive to professional development

activities related to research or acting as a professional development provider. However, she still found the other professional development activities effective to a certain extent thanks to her responsible attitude toward what is provided as well as her lifelong commitment to self-development. She stated:

"I am always open to what is given to me… Sometimes the professional development activity has nothing to do with teaching, but then when we look back, we still find it effective to develop ourselves. In turn, what we can develop thanks to that professional development activity may help us in our teaching".

In addition, the immediate applicability of what is learnt in each professional development activity is also an important factor contributing to the participants' perception of its effectiveness. One third of the interviewees shared a similar viewpoint that a professional development activity is only effective if they can apply what they learn into their own classrooms. Teacher 11, for example, stated that "If I can't apply it right on to my classroom, I need to reconsider the effectiveness of it, or I'll soon forget it." This teacher also shared that most of the time she found the professional development content just effective when she was listening to it in the conference room but ineffective outside because she didn't have opportunities to apply what was given to her. Teacher 12 added that "the conference content sometimes cannot inspire the participants to learn more"; that was the reason why it was partially effective. It can be interpreted from the teachers' quotes that only with what is delivered in the workshop without practicing time or further learning, the participants cannot maximize the effectiveness of what is provided. Teacher 07, from her own experience, asserted that one professional development activity should not be an end in itself but should be the one that can interact with the other activities in certain aspects. The idea of these teachers somewhat reflects the idea by Desimone about opportunities for active learning [18] and that by Farakish et al., who advocate the integration

of two different professional development activities, including workshops, to better the professional development outcomes [39]. As a matter of fact, the time allotted for one activity cannot be too long (Teachers 12 and 13), which may restrict the intended content or the practice time. When two or more activities are integrated, the practicality of the professional development activities may be enhanced. This finding, again, affirms the influence of professional development features on the teachers' perception. What is new in this finding is that it not only was about the opportunities for active learning but also emphasized the importance of continuing activities to boost active learning among teachers.

In order for these opportunities to be created, favorable institutional conditions are necessary. Teachers 02 and 03 shared that after they attended a short course on rater training, they needed to work as raters in their institution. In their cases, they could practice what they had learned in reality, which supported their understanding and application. In other words, the practicality of the formal professional development activity interacted with the institutional requirements, and this interaction resulted in professional development effectiveness as perceived by the teachers. It seems clear from this finding that social context (i.e., institution-related context) and its interaction with the features of a professional development activity play an important role in the professional development effectiveness enhancement. This finding is consistent with that by Admiraal et al. who propose to embed the professional development activity in the institution [35]. Even though the study by Admiraal et al., focuses on the school level, it still stresses the importance of the context in which what is provided in workshops or courses is exercised [35].

5. Implications

With all of the findings mentioned above, this study suggests some implications for individual teachers, institutional managers and professional development organizers.

5.1. Implications for Individual Teachers

As for individual teachers, it is first useful to note that they should set personal priorities/aims whenever being invited to a professional development activity. They should bear in mind that even though the main component of any professional development activity is its content, it is not necessarily the only thing for them to learn. In different cases, teachers can obtain various skills or knowledge points from a course/workshop/conference, just like the way the participants of this study could. Therefore, if teachers have clear aims prior to their attendance of any formal professional development activities, regardless of the organizers, they are more likely to welcome what is provided to them, optimistically and non-judgmentally.

In addition, in order to maximize the impacts of a professional development activity, the participating teachers should actively seek help from the materials, the other participants, or the trainers/ facilitators, instead of merely passively attending the process. For instance, further materials, or at least a suggested list of those, are often provided at courses/workshops/ conferences. However, if the participants do not dig into those, they may not deeply understand what is presented by the trainers/facilitators. In this case, they probably evaluate such courses/workshops/conferences as ineffective but in fact the ineffectiveness is caused by their passive learning style.

5.2. Implications for Institutional Managers and Professional Development Organizers

Regarding institutional managers and professional development organizers, they are responsible for ensuring the quality of any professional development activities they provide and thus they should pay attention to each and every element of the professional development activities. For example, since most teachers, just like those in this study, still focus on how updated and relevant the professional

development content is, the topics and scope of the provided information need to be carefully selected in a certain period of time. Therefore, the analysis of teachers' professional needs is of critical importance instead of choosing professional development content merely based on top-down requirements. The other elements should also be concerned in the same way, i.e., paying attention to teachers' individual and professional features.

It is certainly impossible to meet different demands of all participants; however, collecting periodical feedback can be a good method to improve the quality of a professional development activity by giving timely interventions during the process or creating appropriate follow-up activities. In order to successfully manage these interventions or follow-up activities, institutional managers and professional development organizers need to put the social context (especially the institutional conditions) into adequate consideration. If there is a lack of favorable institutional conditions for a desired professional development activity, proposals of improvements to higher authoritative bodies should be brought forward.

6. Conclusion

In short, regarding the effectiveness of formal professional development activities (i.e., courses, workshops, conferences, and seminars), three out of fourteen participants in this study confirmed their satisfaction with every activity they took part in; whereas, the other participants held contradicting views on different activities they experienced. Also, their judgement on the effectiveness of a particular professional development activity may be changing across their career paths.

It is informed that these differences and changes in the participating teachers' perceptions are affected by the professional development activity features, personal context, social context, and the interaction among these factors. As indicated from the data of the present study, the determining features of an effective professional development activity include the quality of the provided content and the qualities of the professional development facilitator/trainer. Interacting with these features are some other crucial personal factors (i.e. the participant's preferences or expectations, and professional growth across time) as well as social factors (i.e. the immediate applicability of the professional development content and favorable institutional conditions). It is suggested from the data of this study that such differences probably result from the participating teachers' identity constructed and reconstructed thanks to their years of experience as well as what they have absorbed during their professional development trajectory. However, further studies should be conducted in order to obtain more evidence and gain more insights into this phenomenon.

These findings affirm that formal professional development activities have certain values and that these values are not determined by one single aspect only. It can be interpreted that all stakeholders, including individual teachers, institutional managers and professional development organizers, should be involved in the process of creating a successful formal professional development activity.

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