HIGH SCHOOL EFL TEACHERS' SELF-DIRECTED STRATEGIES IN RESPONSE TO THE STANDARDS-BASED PROFICIENCY LEVEL

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(Received: 10/6/2016; Revised: 05/10/2016; Accepted: 06/01/2017)

ABSTRACT

This investigation focuses on the self-directed proficiency development strategies of EFL high school teachers in the Mekong Delta for achieving the standards-based proficiency level required by the National Foreign Language Project 2020. The results indicated that the teachers were rarely engaged in activities to develop their English proficiency and finding learning materials via the Internet was the most popular strategy.

Keywords: teachers' language proficiency, self-directed strategies, professional development.

TÓM TẮT

Chiến lược tự phát triển của giáo viên tiếng Anh trung học phổ thông
trong việc đạt chuẩn năng lực tiếng Anh

Nghiên cứu này nhằm mục đích tìm hiểu những chiến lược tự phát triển năng lực tiếng Anh của giáo viên tiếng Anh bậc THPT ở Đồng Bằng Sông Cửu Long trong việc đạt chuẩn ngoại ngữ theo yêu cầu của đề án ngoại ngữ quốc gia 2020. Kết quả nghiên cứu cho thấy mức độ giáo viên tham gia vào các hoạt động tự phát triển năng lực tiếng Anh không cao. Việc sử dụng Internet để tìm tài liệu học là chiến lược phổ biến nhất.

Từ khóa: năng lực ngôn ngữ của giáo viên, chiến lược tự phát triển, phát triển chuyên môn.

1. Introduction

Language proficiency is part of professional standards for EFL teachers, and is emphasized for its indispensability in second language teacher education by NCATE and ACTFL [3]. The threshold level needed for non-native teachers to deliver necessary input and create the environment facilitating language acquisition is the Advanced Low Level of Proficiency [1]. With the Decision No. 1400/QD-TTg issued in 2008 in approval of the National Foreign Language Project 2020 (NFLP), a standards-based framework for language competence reference was established to facilitate curriculum design, teacher

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education, and language proficiency assessment. Accordingly, Vietnamese EFL teachers must attain adequate proficiency levels for each level: primary and secondary school teachers must achieve proficiency level 4 (equivalent to CEFR B2), and high school teachers level 5 (CEFR C1). The very first step of this national project was assessing K12 teachers' English proficiency nationwide. The result indicated that 91% of high school teachers needed further training to be qualified for the standards-based proficiency level [8]. On that ground, local or school change can be affected, given that teacher proficiency impacts teaching quality, and educational change primarily depends upon teachers' change [4]. While retraining teachers has been centralized in form of intensive courses, teacher strategies in response to attainment of such standards has been neglected. This is the reason why this study was conducted to gain insight into their self-directed actions. The result from this study may provide useful implications for the implementation of the national project, which would remain effective on foreign language education upon its completion.

2. Meeting the standards

Today's society has placed more demands on EFL teachers who are faced with complexity and demands in their practices. One of the ways to fulfill the demands is to define the competences and to develop standards to facilitate teacher's assessment and evaluation process [6]. The term "standard" is a model or an example established by authority, custom or agreement. In the context of education, it is referred to as "a benchmark for accountability" or goals achieved by teachers or students [6, p.7].

Professional standards for EFL teachers proposed by international organizations are grouped into specific domains. TESOL (2010) identified 5 domains necessary for English teachers, including Language, Culture, Instruction, Assessment, and Professionalism [6]. From these 5 domains, 11 standards are specified as shown in Figure 1.
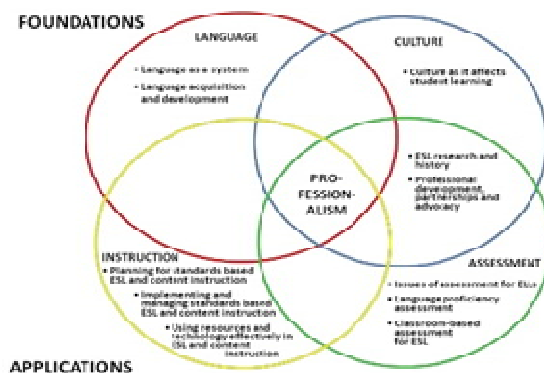

Figure 1. *TESOL P-12 Teacher Education Program Standards [6, p. 6]*

The CAEP, the Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation, formerly the NCATE, specified 3 domains from which standards are described: Content knowledge, Pedagogical knowledge, and Learning environments and Professional knowledge. The TESOL's Language and Culture domain would fall into Content knowledge while Instruction and Assessment domain pertains to Pedagogical knowledge and Professionalism comes into Professional knowledge [6].

In Vietnam, the English Teacher Competency Framework (ETCF) has been proposed by the Project missioned by MOET as national standards for EFL teachers for the 21st century, which would be useful for stakeholders who are engaged in pre-service and in-service teacher training. The ETCF is similarly based on 5 domains: (1) knowledge of subject matter and curriculum, (2) knowledge of teaching, (3) knowledge of learners, (4) professional attitudes and values embedded across knowledge and (5) learning in and from practice and informed by context.

Target language proficiency obviously falls into the language domain (TESOL, 2010), content knowledge domain (CAEP, 2010), knowledge and understanding domain (CEFR, 2001) and knowledge of subject matter and curriculum domain of the Vietnamese competency standards for EFL teachers (ETCF). Together with this, the six-level framework for foreign language references help practitioners make decisions on curriculum design, textbook selection, learning materials, designing criteria for evaluation and assessment. In the framework, language proficiency levels are divided into three broad divisions (Elementary, Intermediate and Advanced) including six levels (from level 1 to level 6 aligned with six levels in the CEFR) (see the Circular No.01/2014/TT-BGDĐT for detail)

Specifically, EFL high school teachers are required to achieve proficiency level 5, which means they:

Can understand a wide range of demanding, longer texts, and recognize implicit meaning; can express him/herself fluently and spontaneously without much obvious searching for expressions; can use language flexibly and effectively for social, academic and professional purposes; can produce clear, well-structured, detailed text on complex subjects, showing controlled use of organizational patterns, connectors and cohesive devices.

Attaining the level 5 (Advanced level) requires a huge investment of effort and time from EFL teachers. It requires a great effort of personally-driven development in language proficiency outside the classroom [1]. In this respect, the fact is that teachers' professional development (PD) in recent years has been moved from institutionally and managerially driven style to personally driven and self-directed one [9]. Self-directed professional

development is defined as "a process in which a learner assumes primary responsibility for planning, implementing, and evaluating the learning process where an education agent or resource often plays a facilitating role in the process" [5, p.57]. Based on this, a 3-stage model of self-directed PD including (1) planning, (2) implementing and (3) evaluating was proposed [5]. Particularly, planning relates to a clear understanding of goals and procedures in which learners look at specific current or future needs for their wants or interests, choose appropriate learning resources and then build up strategies for achieving the goals. Implementing is referred to learners' engagement in learning activities. The final stage is evaluating known as vital for the success of the whole process. It is the evaluation of one's own learning and progress conducted after implementing their personally guided professional activities [5].

As self-directed activities employed by EFL teachers have a huge impact on the feasibility of attaining the required proficiency level and the National Project's success, it becomes essential to investigate the extent to which they have voluntarily implemented strategies to gain more insights into teachers' response to the national language standards policy.

3. Research questions

With the aim of obtaining information self-directed learning strategies used by EFL high school teachers in the Mekong Delta for achieving the standards-based level, the study aimed to answer the following research questions:

a. To which extent have EFL high school teachers undertaken self-directed professional development activities to achieve the standards-based proficiency level required?

b. What are the most and least popular self-directed strategies used by EFL high school teachers to attain the standard-based level?

4. Methods

The current research uses quantitative and qualitative descriptive methods to gather information from the teacher participants. For the quantitative data, questionnaire was adopted while the interview was used for obtaining qualitative data.

4.1. Sampling and Participants

Convenience sampling was employed since it was difficult to approach teachers for collecting data. A total of 200 high school EFL teachers from six cities and provinces in the Mekong Delta (Can Tho, Bac Lieu, Vinh Long, An Giang, Hau Giang and Tien Giang) participated in this study. Specifically, they included 119 females and 41 males. Most of them (121 out of 200 teachers) work in urban areas and have gained a Bachelor's degree (176 teachers). Only 22 teachers have had Master's degrees. Of the total, 176 teachers

major in teaching English as a foreign language; the others major in the English Language Studies. 150 out of 200 teachers have already attended the C1 training course. As for the semi-structure interviews, eight EFL high school teachers from Can Tho, Hau Giang, An Giang, Vinh Long and Bac Lieu were invited to answer interview questions.

4.2. Instruments

The study employed a set of 13-item questionnaire and semi-structured interviews to collect the data. The questionnaire was based on the three-stage self-directed PD model proposed by Guskey, including planning, implementing and evaluating [5]. The rating scale used was a 5-point one, ranging from (1) never, (2) rarely, (3) sometimes, (4) often, (5) always. The interviews consisted of 3 main questions, aiming to discuss two main issues: (1) self-directed PD strategies employed by teachers, (2) reasons for teachers' use of the most and least popular strategies to reach the standard-based level.

5.   Results and Discussion

Responses from the interviews indicate that teachers think their English proficiency does contribute to increasing student's learning outcomes. The majority of the participants (six out of eight) perceive that teachers can increase students' learning motivation and trust as well as building up a good role model for students to follow. One respondent said,

"Yes, the better teachers' language proficiency is, the more interested their students are in learning. When teachers have good language proficiency, it is obvious that they can win students' trust. The students will be keen on learning English. When teachers are good at speaking, students are quite into studying with them (Teacher E)."

Significantly, the teacher interviewees hold positive perceptions of the benefits of attaining the standard-based level for enhancing their sense of confidence in teaching. They have experienced an enhancement in language proficiency and in the level of respect received from their students. Also, they can be protected from a sense of inequality between their own language proficiency and the level of textbooks, and can prove themselves in front of others. As an illustration, one of them stated,

"Yes, my pronunciation and grammar are better, which gives me more confidence as teaching. I tend to use more English in class. Students also have more respect for me (Teacher E)."

However, despite their positive perceptions of the contribution of teachers' language proficiency to teachers' confidence and students' learning outcomes, results from the questionnaires and the interviews showed that the extent to which the teachers engaged in self-initiated proficiency development was not as high as "often". The overall mean score

of their personally driven English development (M = 3.65, SD=.58) is significantly different from the value 4 (*p* = .00) as checked by t-test.

Table 1 presents specific planning actions of the teachers. It can be seen that they tended to often have a plan to improve their own current proficiency levels (M = 3.7), but the wide standard deviation showed a contrasting report among the teachers. This pattern is common across other strategies (2, 4, and 5). However, the extent to which they recognized the needs for achieving the goal in the planning stage was not as high as 'often', significantly different from value 4 (*p* = .00), which also applies to strategy 2. One fact was that they clearly knew their current level (M=.4.24, SD=.69), which possibly drove their choice of how to improve their proficiency.

Table 1. Self-directed strategies for the planning stage

	Strategy	**N**	**Min.**	**Max.**	**Mean**	**SD**
1	I have a study plan to achieve the C1 level myself.	200	1.00	5.00	3.70	.99
2	I look for effective strategies to develop language proficiency to attain the C1 level myself.	200	1.00	5.00	3.71	.92
3	I know the current level of my language proficiency.	200	2.00	5.00	4.24	.69
4	I recognize the needs for attaining the C1 level.	200	1.00	5.00	3.78	.82
5	I know how to choose appropriate learning materials to achieve my goals.	200	1.00	5.00	3.93	1.00

(1=never, 2= rarely, 3=sometimes, 4=often, 5= always)

In implementing strategies, the most popular one employed by the EFL high school teachers was finding materials via the Internet (M = 3.89, SD = .78) while joining a self-study group with colleagues (M = 2.92, SD = 1.09) and engaging in activities outside the class (M = 2.80, SD = 1.28) were the least popular ones (*see Table 2*). Overall, the level of their engagement in self-improvement activities was medium.

Table 2. Self-directed strategies for the implementing stage

	Strategy	N	Min.	Max.	Mean	SD
6	I engage myself in activities that can develop my English proficiency.	200	1.00	5.00	2.80	1.29
7	I listen to various materials in English.	200	1.00	5.00	3.68	.88
8	I find learning materials via the internet.	200	2.00	5.00	3.89	.78
9	I join a self-study group with colleagues.	200	1.00	5.00	2.92	1.09
10	I seek to enroll in a C1- equivalent training course.	200	1.00	5.00	3.52	.97

Overall, self-evaluating strategies were not often employed. Although the teachers reported evaluating their strengths and weaknesses more often (M = 3.95), they only sometimes reflected on their learning process as well as the effectiveness of their action plan, as shown in Table 3.

Table 3. Self-directed strategies for the evaluation stage

Evaluating strategy	N	Min.	Max.	Mean	SD
10. I evaluate the process or result of my study myself.	200	1.00	5.00	3.63	.89
11. I ask myself whether the learning materials or activities I have used are effective.	200	1.00	5.00	3.68	.95
12. I evaluate my strengths and weaknesses myself.	200	1.00	5.00	3.95	.88

Responses from the interviews indicate that half of teacher interviewees chose to study at home instead of joining the C1 training classes for the limited time and geographical distance. They claim,

"I study at home. I follow the strategies proposed by Ngoc Bach on his face book 'Self-study IELTS 8.0'. It's very effective but we must be patient. Because my home is far away from Can Tho city, I cannot attend C1 classes (Teacher A, who has not attained the C1 level).*"*

"I study at home. I read these materials and do exercises. I search the Internet for extra learning materials and borrow them from my friends who have attained the C1 level (Teacher B, who has attained the C1 level.)"

As reported by the interviewees, the shortage of time to participate in proficiency development activities was due to heavy workload at school and in family. This result was also reported in previous research [10].

"I am a novice teacher so my current teaching materials are very limited. It takes a lot of time to prepare for my teaching. Also, apart from teaching, I am attending a master class so the time for study is much more reduced. It is hard for me to concentrate on studying to get C1." (A novice teacher from a rural school).

Other reasons they attributed to the low level of involvement in personally driven activities for English development included students' low motivation for studying English, lack of English speaking environment, lack of learning materials and proficiency development programs. It was found that the limitation in PD programs for EFL teachers is a barrier to their proficiency development [7].

"There are a few seminars to improve your knowledge. I do not have time for self-study because I must teach, make lesson plans and mark students' papers. PD activities in high schools are very boring." (An experienced teacher from an urban special school).

The aforementioned challenges in proficiency development account for the fact that the EFL high school teachers had an intention to study to improve their English skills, but failed to realize it. EFL teachers' recognition of self-directed professional development activities seems noticeable given that they seldom do personally driven activities [9].

Accessing the Internet for learning materials proves to be the most favorite strategy employed by all of the interviewees as it helps them download more reading exercises and free C1-equivalent books and know more effective strategies for doing the exam. One of them said,

"Certainly, there are a wide range of CAE books and exercises on the Web. They are all free" (A novice teacher from a special school).

Nevertheless, the teachers were likely to utilize the Internet as a medium of finding further learning materials rather than a virtual English community to enhance their language use. This result is in line with the study on the responses of Vietnamese EFL school teachers in the Northern areas to the national language standards [8].

Meanwhile, seven out of eight participants did not join a self-study group with colleagues as they did not consider it a useful strategy for proficiency development and found it difficult to manage their limited time to study in a group, as the respondents said,

"Teachers are very busy with the teaching schedule. It is impossible to get together to study." (A novice teacher in a special school)

"I like to study alone as I think I can remember knowledge better." (An experienced teacher in a city school)

It can be argued that almost all of the interviewed EFL school teachers have a tendency to employ individual strategies rather than social strategies for English proficiency improvement to gain standard-based levels regardless of their various backgrounds [8].

To sum up, the EFL high school teachers reported planning to study more often than they implemented their intention, and overall, they were not often engaged in self-directed PD activities to improve their proficiency level. They often used the Internet to search for learning materials, but rarely took it as a medium to practice their English.

6. Conclusion and Implications

Despite the non-probable sample of the study, it uncovers evidence that although the EFL high school teachers considerably emphasized the importance of teachers' language proficiency for teaching and learning English, they lacked commitment to self-directed activities for proficiency development. They failed to be fully aware of the needs for attaining the standards-based level in the very first step of the planning stage. They also had few initiatives for building up a study plan and for finding strategies useful for their studies. Engaging in activities to enhance their language proficiency, specifically joining a study group with colleagues was quite irregular mainly due to the difficulty in time management.

Such findings suggest that a dilemma exists. While efforts of the national project were made to upgrade teacher levels of proficiency, they themselves seemed to lack commitment to their self-development. The results appear to reveal that the teachers felt a pressure rather than a benefit to their jobs as well as the teaching and learning quality.

Further actions should continue to be taken. On the individual level, teachers need to be made fully aware of the importance and realize the needs for achieving the standards required so that they commit themselves to learning opportunities offered to them or create their own self development opportunities.

On the institutional level, opportunities to maintain and develop English proficiency should be equally offered to all teachers. More proficiency development programs should be delivered and taken as an on-going support to assist them in attaining the required level. It could be that university educators, specialists, and in-service teachers cooperate in planning professional development activities that could attract the teachers [3]. The maintenance and enhancement of language teachers' proficiency can be achieved by using the Internet for access to target language communities to generate interaction in the target language [1]. The Internet could be used as a fruitful means to engage them in English communities due to the lack of English speaking environment in their teaching settings. English language teachers should take advantage of Internet resources, broadcasts to upgrade their language use, instead of just searching for materials. Meanwhile, consistent

proficiency maintenance programs should not be neglected. Cooperation among teachers in the form of study groups should also be facilitated and encouraged by school authorities to form small English communities in which they could support each other to achieve and maintain the proficiency standards. On the top of that, managers, educators and school authorities should encourage teachers to take initiatives in building up their own plans and detailed procedures of study activities, which could increase their motivation and commitment rather than waiting to be trained or sent to training courses.

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