

Exploring EFL Teachers' Perceptions of Self-Directed Learning for Professional Development in a Context of High Schools

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Abstract

This study investigates teachers' perceptions of self-directed learning for professional development. One hundred and four EFL teachers from public high schools in a province in the Mekong Delta, Vietnam, volunteered to participate in the descriptive study with a convergent mixed-methods design. A questionnaire and semi-structured interview were employed as the two instruments for a convenient sampling method of data collection. An SPSS descriptive statistical test and one-Sample t-test were conducted to evaluate the differences between the mean scores of the teachers' perceptions from a test value of a 5-point Likert scale. Thematic analysis was applied to the qualitative data for the in-depth explanation of their perceptions of the roles, the benefits, and challenges of self-directed learning for professional development.

The results indicate that the teachers show a positive agreement on the significance of self-directed learning for professional development. In addition, sharing teaching experiences and collaborative development, enhancing teaching methods, and exchanging knowledge are frequently employed by most teachers. However, lack of institutional support, financial problems, family responsibilities, and workload are the main factors hindering them from engaging in self-directed learning for professional growth. In the article, teachers' plans and expectations of self-directed learning for professional development are also addressed.

The findings from this study foster the teachers' awareness of the significance of their self-directed learning for professional growth, inform the educational managers in promoting a conducive environment for self-directed learning for professional development, and suggest research areas in the future.

Keywords: EFL high school teachers, self-directed learning, professional development.

Изучение представлений учителей EFL о самостоятельном обучении для профессионального развития в условиях средней школы

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Аннотация

Исследование посвящено изучению восприятия учителями самостоятельного обучения в целях профессионального развития. Сто четыре учителя EFL из государственных средних школ в провинции, находящейся в дельте Меконга (Вьетнам), добровольно согласились принять участие в описательном исследовании с использованием конвергентных смешанных методов. Авторами статьи были использованы полуструктурированные интервью и анкета для релевантности выборочного метода сбора данных. С целью изучения различий между средними оценками восприятия учителей по 5-балльной шкале Лайкерта были проведены описательный статистический тест SPSS и t-тест с одной выборкой. В работе с качественными данными был применен тематический анализ для углубленного объяснения представлений испытуемых о ролях, преимуществах и проблемах самостоятельного обучения для профессионального развития. Результаты исследования свидетельствуют о том, что учителя EFL положительно оценивают важность самостоятельного обучения для своего профессионального развития. Большинство респондентов часто используют обмен педагогическим опытом и знаниями, занимаются совместным развитием, а также совершенствованием методики преподавания дисциплины. Однако отсутствие институциональной поддержки, финансовые проблемы, семейные обязанности и перегрузка учителей являются основными факторами, препятствующими их самостоятельному обучению в целях профессионального роста. В статье рассматриваются планы и ожидания учителей в отношении самостоятельного обучения для профессионального развития. Результаты данной работы повышают осведомленность учителей о важности их самостоятельного обучения для профессионального роста, информируют менеджеров, работающих в сфере образования, о необходимости создания благоприятной среды для самостоятельного обучения педагогов, способствующего их профессиональному развитию, а также предлагают направления будущих исследований.

Ключевые слова: учителя EFL средней школы, самостоятельное обучение, профессиональное развитие.

Introduction

Globalization has impacted not only all aspects of human life but also the educational environment in general and the Vietnamese educational system in particular. Therefore, the Vietnamese government has focused on developing teachers' professional skills, as

teachers are seen as essential factors in the academic environment to improve students' achievement and the quality of education. English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers must equip themselves with up-to-date theoretical and pedagogical knowledge that aligns with the progress of the globalized world and the growing needs of students since English has been considered a vital component of contemporary life and education. In this regard, professional development (PD) plays a crucial role in the career path of in-service teachers (Richards & Farrell, 2011). The teachers must have PD opportunities because they must keep updating their knowledge and skills to develop professionally (Richards & Farrell, 2005). In reality, teachers' knowledge about language teaching and learning provided at training courses organized by educational institutions is not always sufficient. Accordingly, teachers need to update current knowledge, approaches, and other advancements in teaching and learning English with one or many of various activities, such as doing (action) research, participating in workshops or training, practicing reflective teaching, enacting self-directed learning (SDL), observing classes, coaching, self-evaluating for teacher autonomy, collaborating with other teachers for lesson study, and so on (Thompson, 2022).

Besides, to better prepare Vietnamese citizens for globalization and internationalization, the National Foreign Languages 2020 Project (NFLP 2020) launched by the Ministry of Education and Training (MOET) has stressed the pressing need to enhance the quality of teaching and learning foreign languages, mainly English, to fulfill the student's needs at all levels of schooling (MOET, 2008). In addition, Vietnam's English Teacher Competency Framework (ETCF), adopted by the Ministry of Education and Training in December 2012, is a standardized framework for teacher development that aims to improve the quality of English teaching and learning in Vietnam. The ETCF includes the competencies, knowledge, skills, values, and processes teachers need to impart. It is not only a guide for teachers to self-study for ongoing PD throughout their careers but also a tool for them to analyze their requirements and recommend particular areas for the content of training programs (MOET, 2013). EFL teachers should always equip themselves with up-to-date knowledge and pedagogical skills to provide effective instruction for all students and fulfill society's demands in their teaching careers. Teachers should immediately begin training courses mandated by the Department of Education and Training or by educational institutions during the academic year. However, they should self-assess their weaknesses and needs for SDL. As a result, to satisfy the demands of their professions, teachers "have to invest in their PD and, in some cases, use their resources to ensure that their students do well" (Mushayikwa, 2013, p. 227). Teachers self-direct their learning to develop their competencies professionally inside or outside their workplaces, individually or in collaboration with their colleagues. They decide when, where, and why to improve their PD.

SDL, defined broadly as teachers' initiative for PD, seems to be a successful strategy teachers can use for their PD (Mushayikwa & Lubben, 2009). SDL has been proposed as a means of achieving the aims of teachers' PD as this norm includes all-natural learning experiences as well as conscious and planned activities that are intended to be of direct or indirect benefit to the individual, group, or school, and which contribute to the quality of education in the classroom (Day, 1999). It enables individuals to enhance their self-confidence, autonomy, motivation, and lifelong learning skills (O'Shea, 2003). SDL is currently important in Vietnam because it helps promote the active role of teachers in PD, contributing to the current education innovation. Accordingly, this study investigates how EFL teachers perceive SDL for PD in the context of high schools.

Literature review

Definitions of Self-directed learning for adult learners

SDL was introduced in 1967 in the context of adult learning (Boyer et al., 2013). In response to how adults acquire knowledge, SDL gained empirical attention in the 1970s for precise definition and promotion (Brookfield, 1985b). Although individuals of various ages may engage in SDL, literature predominantly focuses on adult learners (Ellinger, 2004).

SDL involves the initiative for self-driven learning, choosing content, timing, and methods (Mushayikwa & Lubben, 2009; Slavits & Roth McDuffie, 2013). In this sense, self-learning, autonomous learning, and self-regulated learning are used interchangeably (Brockett & Hiemstra, 1991; Van Den Bergh et al., 2015). The researchers also employ terms like self-initiated learning and self-motivated learning, aligning with the essence of SDL (Kolenc Kolnik, 2010).

SDL was defined by Garrison (1997, p. 18) as an approach for motivating learning with self-monitoring and self-management processes in constructing and confirming meaningful and worthwhile learning outcomes. From a different perspective, Morris (2019) perceived SDL with additional attributes, including personal autonomy, self-management, and autodidact, while Brockett and Hiemstra (1991, p. 24) refer SDL to primary responsibility for planning, carrying out, and evaluating a learning endeavor.

Roles of SDL for PD

SDL empowers individuals to take charge of their learning journey, from setting individualized goals and identifying resources to implementing learning strategies and engaging in critical reflection. SDL, recognized as both a psychological aspect and a personality trait, influences one's willingness to learn, influencing PD outcomes. The following parts explain how SDL, linked to academic achievement, constitutes a predictor of fulfillment and emerges as an important motivation in pursuing ongoing professional development.

- Goal setting and initiative: SDL involves individuals setting their own learning goals and taking the initiative to identify their learning needs (Knowles, 1975). This statement aligns with the goal-setting aspect of professional development.

- Resource identification: SDL requires learners to locate human and material resources for learning (Knowles, 1975). In the context of PD, this involves identifying relevant resources for skill enhancement or knowledge acquisition.

- Learning strategies: SDL encompasses selecting and implementing appropriate learning strategies (Brookfield, 1985a). In the realm of professional development, this includes choosing effective strategies to improve job-related skills or acquire new competencies.

- Evaluation and critical reflection: SDL involves individuals evaluating their learning outcomes through critical reflection (Brookfield, 1985b). In professional development, this role is crucial for assessing the impact of learning experiences and refining future goals and strategies.

- Personality trait: SDL is viewed as a psychological aspect and a personality trait (Garrison, 1997). This idea suggests that individuals with certain personality traits, such as high self-efficacy and intrinsic motivation, are more inclined towards SDL, which can influence their PD.

- Association with academic achievement: SDL is associated with academic achievement, and studies have found positive correlations between SDL and GPA or course grades (Chou & Chen, 2008). SDL plays a role in educational success, which may extend to PD achievements.

– Predictor of academic success: SDL has been considered a predictor of academic success in various learning settings, including traditional and non-web-based distance learning (Hsu & Shiue, 2005). This predictive role may also extend to success in professional development efforts.

In other words, understanding SDL's roles in goal setting, resource identification, learning strategies, evaluation, and its association with personality traits and academic success can provide valuable insights for leveraging SDL in ongoing PD. The diverse roles of SDL in professional development highlight its importance in shaping effective learning pathways.

Benefits of SDL for PD

Research consistently affirms the favorable influence of SDL on PD, emphasizing diverse advantages that enhance the efficacy of this strategy. SDL fosters intrinsic motivation and engagement. When professionals can choose their learning paths and objectives, they are more likely to be motivated by personal interest and relevance, leading to a more profound commitment to the learning process (Knowles, 1975). In a study conducted by Tough (1979), the flexibility inherent in SDL is noted as a critical factor in adult learning. Professionals engaged in PD often have busy schedules and varied learning preferences. SDL accommodates these differences, allowing individuals to learn at their own pace and choose resources that align with their preferred learning styles, contributing to better adaptability in changing professional landscapes. In addition, SDL allows for tailored learning experiences, which is crucial for skill development in PD. Professionals can focus on acquiring specific skills relevant to their current or future roles, ensuring that the learning is directly applicable and beneficial to their professional growth (Garrison, 1997; Guglielmino, 1978).

Furthermore, Mezirow (1991) suggests a positive correlation between SDL and career advancement. Professionals actively engaging in SDL are better positioned to acquire the skills and knowledge necessary for career progression. SDL empowers individuals to take charge of their PD, contributing to their career success.

Obstacles of SDL for PD

Implementing SDL for PD is a transformative endeavor, but it comes with challenges that individuals must navigate. One significant obstacle is the issue of time constraints. Professionals with busy schedules may hinder their ability to engage deeply in SDL initiatives (Jeong et al., 2018). The balancing act between work responsibilities and personal commitments poses a real challenge and necessitates strategies for effective time management. Financial conditions are also a serious problem that teachers encounter when dealing with SDL for PD and this was supported by the study of Plaza & Jamito (2021).

Another notable obstacle is the potential need for more resources. The availability and accessibility of relevant learning materials, courses, and tools can significantly impact the success of SDL for PD. Guglielmino (1978) emphasizes that insufficient access to resources may impede the learning process, limiting the scope and effectiveness of self-directed initiatives.

Motivational challenges also emerge as a significant hurdle. Knowles (1975) underscores the importance of sustained motivation for successful SDL. While SDL is designed to foster intrinsic motivation, individuals may still experience periods of low engagement.

The isolation inherent in SDL can also hinder successful implementation. Mezirow's (1991) research points to the importance of a learning community and mentorship for

effective self-directed learning. Individuals may feel disconnected without a structured support system, emphasizing the need for organizations to establish networks that facilitate collaboration and knowledge sharing.

Technological barriers further complicate the implementation of SDL for PD. Caffarella (1993) highlights how individuals with limited digital literacy or inadequate access to online platforms may need help with self-directed online learning.

Moreover, goal ambiguity poses a challenge. Setting clear and achievable learning goals is crucial for successful SDL. Tough (1979) suggests that professionals may need more certainty in goal-setting.

Research methodology

Research design

This descriptive research employed a convergent mixed-methods design with quantitative and qualitative data from a questionnaire and interviews to answer the research question about the EFL high school teachers' perceptions of SDL for PD, specifically regarding the roles, benefits, and obstacles of SDL for PD.

Participants

The study employed convenience sampling to select participants who were readily accessible and willing to participate (Creswell, 2014). The participants included 104 EFL teachers from different public high schools in a province in the Mekong Delta region of Vietnam.

The number of teachers in rural and urban areas was similar among the participants. About half of the respondents have more than 20 years of teaching experience, 10.6% ($n = 104$) of the participants have less than five years of teaching experience, 7.7% of the participants from 6 to 10 years, and the rest of them from 11 to 20 years of teaching experience. Moreover, most of the EFL teachers had BA degrees (90.4%), and only ten of them (9.6%) had an MA degree in English language teaching.

To gain deep insights into their perceptions of SDL for PD, the researchers conducted a semi-structured interview with participants who responded to the questionnaire and showed their willingness to participate in interviews in reply to the researchers' invitation. Eight out of 104 respondents agreed to participate in the interviews. The interviewees came from both groups, with minor and much teaching experience and working in urban and rural areas.

The questionnaire

A five-point Likert questionnaire was used to gather quantitative data. Except for five points to get personal information about participants' gender, age, educational qualifications, years of teaching experience, and places of teaching in the first part, the central part included twenty-nine items presented in 3 clusters that were developed from the core key elements of the conceptual framework about the roles, the benefits, and the obstacles of SDL for PD as reviewed in the relevant literature. In particular, the first cluster included nine items (from item 1 to item 9) to explore participants' perceptions of the roles of SDL for PD. The second cluster consisted of 10 items (from item 10 to item 19) to investigate EFL teachers' perceptions of the benefits of SDL for PD. Finally, ten items (from item 20 to item 29) focused on the obstacles hindering their self-directed PD learning.

The questionnaire was piloted with the participation of thirty EFL teachers (24 females and eight males) who shared the same teaching background as the official research participants. The researchers provided careful instructions to ensure they could

understand the questionnaire more clearly. The SPSS version 20 was used to check the instrument's reliability with the pilot data, of which Cronbach's Alpha (α) was .84.

To administer the questionnaire, the researchers arrived at each high school to ask the principal for a consent form so that the teachers could participate in the study. After receiving the principals' permission, the questions were officially distributed to 110 teachers from 13 public high schools teaching in urban and rural areas. However, only 104 valid questionnaires were collected at the end.

The questionnaire data was coded into numbers and analyzed using the Statistical Package for the Social Science (SPSS) software version 20. First, the Reliability Test was run to check the questionnaire's reliability, and the result showed that the instrument was reliable ($\alpha = .93$). Next, Descriptive Statistics Tests were calculated to observe the whole group's mean scores, maximum, minimum, and standard deviations for the clusters. The framework by Jenkins (2007) was employed to understand the average between 1.0 and 5.0 Likert-scale questions of the meanings of mean scores recognized as (1) Very high: 4.21–5.00, (2) High: 3.41–4.20, (3) 2.61–3.40: Medium, (4) 1.81–2.60: Low, 1.00–1.80: Very low.

The interviews

Regarding the qualitative data, the interviews were utilized to gather more comprehensive information about the EFL teachers' perceptions of SDL for PD and their insights into this issue.

The interviews were piloted with three participants who shared the same teaching background but were outsiders to the research population of the present study. The Vietnamese language was used during the interviews so interviewees could respond to the questions comprehensively and comfortably.

The interview questions included two main parts. The first one focused on preparing the participants to share by asking them for general information about their work, education, and experience. In the main part, open-ended questions were posed concerning three main clusters of the study: (1) the teacher participants' understanding of the roles, (2) the benefits of SDL for PD, and (3) obstacles hindering their SDL for PD.

After receiving the consent from the eight teacher participants, the researchers contacted them via email and phone to arrange the interviews. According to Guest et al. (2006), conducting six to twelve interviews is enough to achieve saturation when the participant group is relatively homogeneous. The interviews were conducted individually in an informal setting to accommodate the specific context and situation, allowing the interviewees to express their genuine emotions without facing negative consequences (Christensen, 1980). This enabled the researchers to control the direction of the discussion and establish a confidential atmosphere, encouraging respondents to express their views openly. Each interview lasted an average of 45 minutes and was recorded. The recordings and notes were transcribed to check data reliability and validity, understand the participants' thoughts better, and confirm the point of data saturation, which led to the unnecessary invitation to conduct more interviews. The Vietnamese transcripts were then translated into English by two experts with more than 20 years of experience in professional translation and interpretation.

Thematic analysis was adopted to examine data gained from the semi-structured interviews. This type of analysis was chosen for several reasons. First, it is a flexible and helpful approach to analyzing qualitative data (Percy et al., 2015). Second, thematic analysis has the potential to provide insightful, rich, and detailed data by capturing the complexity that exists in the data (Crowe et al., 2015). The transcribed data were coded into pre-existing categories and developed based on the literature review.

Findings

Data obtained from the two research instruments will be considered simultaneously. First, Descriptive Statistics Tests were run to analyze the mean scores of the three clusters toward participants' perceptions of SDL roles, benefits, and obstacles for PD from the questionnaire. The results of the tests are shown in Table 1.

Table 1. *Descriptive Statistics of the participants' perceptions of SDL roles, benefits, and obstacles for PD*

	<i>N</i>	<i>Min</i>	<i>Max</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>
The roles of SDL for PD	104	3.22	5.0	4.18	.38
The benefits of SDL for PD	104	3.0	5.0	4.15	.35
The obstacles of SDL for PD	104	2.24	4.71	3.42	.47

As can be seen in the Table above, the mean scores of participants' perceptions of the roles of SDL for PD ($M = 4.18$), benefits of SDL for PD ($M = 4.15$), and obstacles of SDL for PD ($M = 3.42$) are at a high level of agreement (mean ranges from 3.41 to 4.20) according to Jenkins (2007). Then, Frequency Tests were run to summarize the participants' responses for each statement in the three mentioned clusters.

Findings on teachers' perceptions of the roles of SDL for PD

Table 2. *Summary of teachers' responses to each item regarding the roles of SDL for PD*

	<i>Statement</i>	<i>Disagree / Strongly disagree</i>	<i>Neutral</i>	<i>Agree / Strongly agree</i>
1	By SDL, I can choose what to study based on my learning needs for PD.	0%	4%	96%
2	By SDL, I can choose what to study based on my learning styles for PD.	2%	3%	95%
3	SDL allows me to acquire various skills that align with my desire for PD.	0%	2%	98%
4	By SDL, I can self-manage my learning according to my circumstances.	1%	5%	94%
5	With SDL, I can learn at my own pace.	5%	1%	94%
6	By SDL, I can make my learning process meaningful.	1%	6%	93%
7	By SDL, I can adapt to challenges in my working environment.	1%	9%	90%
8	As an SDL, I can choose when to start my learning project to develop professionally.	0%	1%	99%
9	As an SDL, I can choose to study anywhere.	1%	4%	95%

As seen in Table 2, up to 99% of participants strongly agreed and agreed with the statement in item 8, and the consensus number is a bit less (98%) for item 3. These findings align with those obtained from the interviews, demonstrating that teachers are conscious of the roles of SDL for PD. The teachers expressed:

"SDL is the process that helps me develop new skills, stay up-to-date on current trends, and advance my profession" (T5 – lines 46–47).

“It is simply a method of learning in which I can use my resources and skills to learn for myself. It is a type of learning that allows me to choose, pursue, and evaluate my own learning” (T2 – lines 21–22).

“SDL is the best way and a helpful tool for me to improve my teaching quality effectively” (T8 – lines 11–12).

Besides, many participants agreed that, through SDL, they could choose what to study based on their learning needs and styles for PD, with 96% and 95% in items 1 and 2. This finding is consistent with the data obtained from the interviews, which showed that all respondents highly appreciated the usefulness of SDL in their teaching profession. For instance, they stated:

“I do not wait for someone else to tell me what to learn or how to learn. I identify my own needs for my learning to better my career” (T6 – lines 12–14).

“I am aware of what I need to study, how long I should study, and what materials or resources I will need” (T7 – lines 37–38).

Similarly, 95%, 94%, and 93%, respectively, were the agreement rates of participants for items 9, 4, 5, and 6, showing that they value the roles of SDL in allowing them to study anywhere, at their own pace and self-manage their learning and make it meaningful. These points were also raised in the interviews:

“By SDL, I can organize my learning or adjust my learning experiences to match my preferences” (T4 – lines 94–95).

“In my teaching, I can ask my colleagues for advice by calling them when I have problems in my teaching, or I use the Internet” (T5 – lines 31–32).

However, ninety percent of participants with strong agreement and agreement in item 7 had yet to learn that adapting SDL for PD could help them overcome the challenges in their teaching context, which means they still doubted their ability to tackle difficulties.

“In some classes with high-achieving students, I have to search the knowledge from many resources to ensure that my teaching materials will make them more interesting” (T7 – lines 46–47).

As stated in the interviews, some teachers agreed that thanks to SLD for the sake of their teaching practice and professional development, they could manage their workload and consider challenges as their learning experiences.

“...through SDL, I cope with and respond to different challenges and problems in my teaching career, especially I try to self-direct my learning to catch up with the changes in the field of ELT” (T5 – lines 74–75).

Findings on teachers’ perceptions of the benefits of implementing SDL for PD

Table 3. Summary of teachers’ responses to each item regarding the benefits of SDL for PD

	Statement	Disagree / Strongly disagree	Neutral	Agree / Strongly agree
10	I believe that SDL can enhance my self-awareness of career development.	1%	3%	96%
11	I believe that SDL can enhance my self-reflection skills in teaching.	0%	11%	89%
12	I believe that SDL can prepare me with up-to-date knowledge and skills in my teaching profession.	1%	4%	95%

	<i>Statement</i>	<i>Disagree / Strongly disagree</i>	<i>Neutral</i>	<i>Agree / Strongly agree</i>
13	I believe that SDL can help me improve the quality of my teaching practice.	0%	8%	92%
14	I believe that SDL can develop my self-confidence in my work.	0%	5%	95%
15	I believe that SDL can help me to become more motivated toward my work.	1%	6%	93%
16	I believe that SDL can develop my self-discipline toward my work.	0%	8%	92%
17	I believe that SDL can develop my self-regulation at work.	0%	11%	89%
18	I believe that SDL can develop my goal-oriented active learning.	0%	8%	92%
19	I believe that SDL can help me to engage in life-long learning.	1%	10%	90%

All the items about the participants' perspectives on the benefits of implementing SDL for PD were highly appreciated. Notably, most respondents agree that SDL could enhance their self-awareness of career development (96% in item 10), prepare them with up-to-date knowledge and skills in their teaching profession, and develop their self-confidence in their work (95%) in items 12 and 14. The findings were compatible with the ones gained from the interviews and showed that teachers got many benefits when implementing SDL for PD. They believe that SDL could prepare them with updated knowledge and skills in their teaching profession and help develop their self-confidence in their work. The participants stated that:

"I often find myself reflecting on my teaching methods, assessing student outcomes, and identifying areas where I can enhance my skills" (T3 – lines 23–25).

"... I watched Ted Talk to improve my listening skills..." (T2 – lines 75–76).

Similarly, SDL enables them to be flexible in choosing what to learn and when to stay current in the field. Teachers explained:

"I am interested in technology, and I tried technology for language teaching last year, and it boosted my lessons. SDL let me adapt and use new techniques in my classroom" (T4 –lines 70–72).

"By taking charge of my learning, I can focus on improving specific areas like language teaching, inquiry, and feedback" (T6 – lines 78–79).

"I join online communities or forums for teachers by networking with my colleagues, sharing experiences, and gaining exposure to diverse perspectives, enhancing collaborative and professional learning" (T3 – lines 41–43).

By actively exploring and utilizing these online resources and sharing experiences, resources, and insights with colleagues, the participants can ensure that their teaching practices align with the latest research methodologies and foster a culture of continuous improvement and professional growth. The teachers also believe that SDL empowers them to manage their PD. They feel accomplished and autonomous when they choose what and how to learn. They become more confident in their teaching abilities and feel more motivated.

Most teachers (89%) in item 17 believed that SDL is crucial in developing self-regulation because it requires setting goals, managing time effectively, and staying on track

independently. These practices inherently foster a sense of self-regulation and enhance their self-reflection skills in teaching. The teachers expressed how engaging in SDL has directly influenced their self-regulation in managing their teaching responsibilities as a step of lifelong learning. They reported that:

“I must self-regulate my PD to stay updated on the latest trends, methodologies, and technologies to ensure my teaching remains relevant and effective and to meet diverse student needs” (T7 – lines 11–15).

“I think that teaching students with diverse characteristics and learning preferences requires me to enhance my self-reflecting skills for continuously learning to have a greater ability to meet the linguistic, cultural, and educational needs” (T7 – lines 43–45).

“I engage in continuous learning to incorporate technology effectively into my teaching, utilizing online resources, educational apps, and digital tools to enhance language acquisition” (T8 – lines 38–39).

Finding teachers’ perceptions of the obstacles in engaging SDL for PD

Table 4. Summary of teachers’ responses to each item in obstacles in engaging SDL for PD

	Statement	Disagree / Strongly disagree	Neutral	Agree / Strongly agree
20	I am not motivated to do SDL for PD.	61%	16%	23%
21	I don’t know where to start SDL for PD.	63%	16%	21%
22	I don’t know what to learn for PD.	73%	8%	19%
23	I have difficulty assessing my progress when SDL for PD.	56%	16%	28%
24	Family responsibilities keep me from doing SDL for PD.	37%	16%	47%
25	Financial problems prevent me from doing SDL for PD.	38%	11%	51%
26	The lack of cooperation among colleagues hindered me from implementing the SDL.	52%	21%	27%
27	Too much work at school prevents me from participating in SDL for PD.	21%	25%	54%
28	The lack of facilities prevents me from implementing SDL for PD.	35%	18%	47%
29	The lack of institutional support hinders me from implementing SDL for PD.	28%	32%	40%

Table 4 highlighted that a few participants had obstacles to implementing SDL for PD. Among all the factors preventing teachers from engaging in SDL for PD in their teaching practice, lack of institutional support, lack of facilities, family responsibilities, financial problems, and workload limitations were common factors. The proportions of these barriers are 40%, 47%, 51%, and 54%, respectively (items 29, 24, 28, 25, 27). On the other hand, lack of cooperation among colleagues, difficulty in assessing their SDL and motivation, and not knowing when to start and what to learn for PD were not the main concerns of teachers.

Notably, when asked about the factors impeding their SDL implementation, nearly all teachers suggested that workload was one of the main factors impacting teachers’ participation in SDL for PD. High school teachers often have demanding teaching

schedules with numerous classes, lesson planning, grading, and extracurricular responsibilities. Teachers stated:

"I wanted to try new language teaching methods last semester. I didn't have time to explore and implement those ideas due to a busy schedule and constant grading" (T4 – lines 74–78).

"I wanted to attend an online seminar on the latest trends in language teaching, but with a tight schedule, I couldn't commit to the entire session" (T2 – lines 52–53).

"Undoubtedly, the workload is nonstop. The cycle of grading, meetings, and teaching is permanent. self-directed learning it is frequently secondary" (T6 – lines 95–96).

As a young teacher who must support his elderly parents, financial constraints are a significant factor in his professional development choices. He shared:

"...I had planned to enroll in an MA course, but my father's medical expenses forced me to use my professional development funds for them..." (T8 – lines 146–147).

Meanwhile, financial obligations, particularly caring for family members, affect middle-aged teachers pursuing SDL for PD. They explained that:

"I wanted to attend an MA course last year. However, with the additional expenses of caring for my parents, I had to prioritize their needs over my PD, and attending the conference became financially unfeasible" (T1 – lines 37–38).

"I had planned to attend a workshop or conferences on the latest language teaching methodologies, but an unexpected cost for my children's school fee...my parents..." (T4 – lines 90–93).

Moreover, three teachers cited the lack of facilities as a challenge in implementing SDL for PD, a real obstacle for continuously pursuing professional development. Teacher 5 noted:

"I wanted to integrate multimedia elements into my lessons, but the absence of projectors and suitable software limited my ability to experiment with new teaching techniques. It hindered the implementation of what I learned through SDL" (T5 – lines 39–40).

Furthermore, novice teachers elaborated on their challenges in assessing their progress within the institution. They specifically shared a challenging experience:

"I often try new teaching techniques ... when I apply in class, I don't usually get feedback from others..." (T6, lines 80–81).

In particular, participants shared that difficulties in teaching practice are opportunities to exchange and learn experiences and teaching strategies from colleagues. This underscores their belief in the transformative power of conquering obstacles and is consistent with the idea that facing challenges can foster significant professional growth and improved teaching efficacy. They expressed:

"If I have problems in teaching, I will actively ask my colleagues. This is also an opportunity to get experiences from them" (T1 – lines 24–25).

"I enjoy challenges and likely to explore and get new experiences" (T2 – lines 71–72).

"High school teachers are required to improve both their professional and instructional knowledge to satisfy the new requirements of the new foreign language"

policies and curriculum. I see difficulties as opportunities to have a great teaching achievement” (T2 – lines 87–88).

“I can boost my self-confidence by taking charge of my learning and overcoming challenges” (T2 – lines 55–56).

Discussion

The findings from the questionnaire and interviews showed a high level of consensus among the participants on SDL role and salient features in their professional development. That is, they could choose when to start their learning projects actively. This emphasizes the independence that SDL gives teachers in initiating and managing their learning projects, similar to the study by Mushayikwa & Lubben (2009). In addition, the respondents acknowledged that SDL allows them to choose learning content based on their learning needs. This result is consistent with the research findings of Knowles (1975), which state that SDL promotes meaningful and continuous PD activities by meeting individual teachers’ diverse needs and interests.

Likewise, teachers could cultivate a diverse range of skills aligned with their specific goals for professional growth by employing SDL. This finding indicates that educators view SDL as a flexible and adjustable method for improving skills. This is similar to the study of Morris (2019), indicating that SDL represents a process of learning that is individual, purposeful, and developmental. In other words, SDL promotes independence, choice, and self-actualization. Learners possess the capacity for autonomy and can engage in thoughtful decision-making. Moreover, learners strive towards self-actualization and are provided with boundless opportunities for personal growth.

Another prominent role of SDL in raising awareness of professional development found in this study is that SDL allows for regular reflection on teaching practices, student outcomes, and areas for skill improvement, which helps teachers proactively shape their career paths. In this regard, Mushayikwa (2013, p. 275) argues that teacher independence and initiative are valued under the concept of SDL for PD because it encourages them to seek improvement in areas where they feel inadequate.

Similarly, teachers highly prioritize the flexibility of SDL due to its tendency to allow them to choose, adapt, and integrate innovative approaches, thus creating a culture that promotes continuous growth. This is compatible with research by Mezirow (1991), which found that educators who actively engage in professional development demonstrate greater adaptability and ability to keep up with educational changes.

Furthermore, teachers believe that SDL promotes self-directed professional development, which boosts confidence and motivation. In other words, teachers emphasize the importance of SDL in ensuring adaptation to changing educational landscapes and serving as a means for continuous personal and professional growth. According to Hayes (2019), teacher-initiated professional development is commonly motivated by teachers’ awareness of a need for further knowledge and skills that apply to their professional and personal lives. This type of professional development is often driven by teachers’ self-motivation and willingness to acquire new knowledge.

Lack of institutional support, inadequate facilities, family responsibilities, financial constraints, and workload were identified as barriers to EFL teachers’ SDL for PD. Workload emerged as a significant barrier, with teachers expressing challenges in balancing teaching, grading, and administrative responsibilities. The participants highlighted the constant cycle of daily teaching routines, making integrating SDL into their PD difficult, which is consistent with Jeong et al.’s (2018) finding. Specifically, financial challenges emerged as a common thread influencing PD choices among novice teachers managing

basic needs, mid-career teachers facing unexpected expenses, and experienced teachers diverting funds for family medical expenses. This finding is reinforced by Plaza & Jamito's (2021) study. One more important thing is that the research unveils challenges regarding recognizing teachers' SDL efforts within institutions. Some participants feel their initiatives go unnoticed, highlighting the importance of acknowledgment and support from colleagues and institutions to sustain teachers' motivation for SDL. According to Knowles (1975), internal motivations are typically more potent, effective, and consistent with a genuinely independent, autonomous, and self-motivated desire to learn and change. Moreover, SDL only occurs when a person is intrinsically motivated or willing to make independent choices (Garrison, 1997).

Conclusions and implications

The study proves that teachers value SDL as a crucial means for continuous PD. The combination of quantitative and qualitative data offers a comprehensive portrayal of how SDL empowers teachers to realize their PD. Research results show that teachers have participated in diverse SDL forms, from thoroughly considering their needs to developing their expertise for better teaching.

From the benefits and obstacles of teachers' SDL for their PD, some implications were drawn for English teachers, administrators, and further research. English teachers should adopt SDL for PD because of the flexibility and autonomy it offers them regarding personal and PD. Next, teachers should persevere, overcome obstacles, and devote adequate time to SDL. Last but not least, teachers should explore different strategies or use SDL approaches that work for them to achieve relevant and sustainable PD.

Administrators should recognize teachers' proactive and collaborative efforts in SDL for PD. In addition, it is essential to support initiatives that encourage collaborative PD, such as sharing teaching experiences and participating in the creation of materials. Establishing an environment conducive to maintaining teachers' motivation for SDL for PD is necessary. Teachers should also be given reduced workloads to devote time to SDL and appropriate reward mechanisms to encourage this SDL.

Further studies can be conducted with diverse participants from different educational contexts. It is also helpful to explore valuable insights into the impact of formal research training courses on SDL effectiveness or the role of professional learning communities in raising teachers' perceptions and practice on SDL for PD.

Limitations

Although the study meets its goals, some limitations inevitably are (1) the study context of only 13 public high schools in a province in the Mekong Delta region of Vietnam, (2) the diversity of data collection methods, and (3) the consideration of teachers' SDL only in their PD aspects.

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