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Switching on to Digital Literacy? A Case Study of English Language Teachers at a Vietnamese University

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Abstract

Technology has significantly contributed to the shaping of an increasingly digitalised landscape of today's English language teaching (ELT). Recently, Vietnam has experienced initial development in technology-enhanced language learning (TELL). With its National Foreign Language Project, the country aspires to fully change the face of ELT nationwide by the year 2020 through advancing EFL teachers' digital literacy (DL). Despite this favourable framework, no research has surveyed Vietnamese EFL teachers' DL professional development (DLPD) in the literature to date. This identified research gap was where the present study aimed to situate itself. In this light, the study was conducted with a view to examining the professional needs and current practice of a group of Vietnamese EFL university teachers in relation to DLPD by multiple means of data collection including one-to-one interviews, non-participant observation, document analysis and other relevant observations. The findings revealed positive attitudes and optimistic views that teachers and leaders held about DLPD for teachers. The research also discovered major factors influencing teachers' DLPD. The strongest enabler appeared to be teachers' motivation which were found to be reliant on a number of factors mostly related to appraisals of various types, including sense of self-worth, official recognition, incentives, career advancement, improved working conditions, and other benefits. Key inhibitors included limited resources and time constraints, lack of guidelines, PD, technical and financial support. Most teachers reported having unsatisfactory experiences in DLPD provided by their institution. More importantly, teachers' DLPD needs, expectations and suggestions by both teacher and leaders participants were identified. Drawing on this information, relevant implications for future planning and implementation of DLPD were put forward.

1. Literature review

Recent studies have started exploring ways in which teachers' DL can be enhanced in classroom instruction integrating technology (Chapelle, 2007). Whilst on some occasions, it may be possible to upgrade teachers' DL discretely; developing it from within their teaching practice is believed to be more meaningful and effective (Brooks-Young, 2007). There are a growing number of comprehensive guidelines for EFL teachers' technology integration (Davies & Hewer, 2012; Levy, 2012) and various DL development projects and programmes developed especially for these teachers (Macmillan, 2012; Microsoft, 2013). These efforts have been recognised by ELT experts and practitioners who have anecdotally reported positive experiences utilising these resources in their classrooms via discussion forums (Peachey, 2010; Pegrum, 2012). These useful openly accessible resources can also be integrated into a staff PD or used by teachers as part of self-study PD (Hockly, 2012).

Apart from formal education and training, which is not always feasible and effective, alternatives such as expert-novice teacher mentoring, communities of practice, and self-training, have been put forward (Hubbard & Levy, 2006). One successful example of these practical approaches is Lee's (2007) peer-support enhanced model. This social approach to PD was introduced, via a conference, to a group of 10 Hong Kong secondary school teachers who worked in five peer support groups to apply the principles into their own contexts. Individual interviews and peer-group conferences reflected a strong professional partnership established among participants. Results from the research also showed peer support as an effective means of PD in "increasing professional interactions; broadening perspectives of ICT; increasing reflection; and providing personal and emotional support" (Lee, 2007, p. i).

Post-training and on-going PD of teachers' DL have recently generated increasing research interest.. A good example is Wong and Benson's (2006) observation of the differences in teachers' performance after the training. Contrasting the differences during and after a 15 hour in-service TELL training course of two experienced EFL teachers in Hong Kong, this 18-month case study found positive changes in teachers' practice and unravelled some difficulties that they encountered in applying their acquired ICT knowledge, skills, and integration strategies (Wong & Benson, 2006).

In short, the literature review has shown a general overview of the contemporary DLPD for teachers with diverse aspects unveiled, from DLPD through technology-supported teaching and continuing PD, And yet, there seems to be an apparent void of empirical research in this field, especially with regard to in-service teachers' DLPD in the EFL context of Vietnam, which justified this present study.

2. Methodology and methods

This study was carried out at a Vietnamese university, using a sample of seven teachers drawn from a total of 29 EFL teachers and five senior staff of the university. In addition to two main methods of data collection, one-to-one interviews (of about 40-60 minutes) with these 12 informants and non-participant 100-minute observations with four out of eight teacher participants (3 observation sessions each, document analysis and observations of teachers' other DL practices were also employed. The data analysis procedure included coding, categorising, presenting, interpreting, and reporting the collected information. In coding the data sources, the participants were numbered according to the order of their interview. An adequate set of categories was developed to organise data in a logical system with reference to both the research questions and a relevant *priori* framework. Data from various sources was constantly compared and contrasted to identify common patterns and norms.

3. Main findings and discussion

Concerning teachers' DLPD needs[1] as perceived by leaders and teachers, the majority of informants' responses to the question of what DL aspects teachers needed to develop derived from teachers' classroom practice and the institutional goals in digital integration. Additionally, teachers' awareness and understanding of TELL pedagogy was highlighted, mostly by leaders, as a priority for teachers to develop. The view that pedagogical rather than technological skills should be the focus matches many previous studies' conclusions (Graham, 2005; Rahimi & Yadollahi, 2011).

All the teachers and leaders claimed the necessity of developing the teachers' DL professionally and confirmed willingness to take part in relevant PD. However, these positive attitudes did not necessarily result in motivation towards DLPD. In contrast to Lam's (2000) research findings, this current study found that teachers were reluctant and even resistant to technology-focused PD, which was closely linked with motivation and the insufficient institutional provision in this area. It was reported that the university failed to meet the demand for teachers' DLPD and did not match very well with their needs in both quantity and quality. A similar situation was depicted in a few studies in similar EFL contexts (Son et al., 2011; Suwannasom, 2010; Yeung et al., 2012). Meanwhile a greater number of studies reported opposite experiences (Lee, 2007; Wong & Benson, 2006).

According to the participants, such unsatisfactory DLPD could be attributed to the same existing obstacles that the institution and the teachers were facing in DL practices as mentioned earlier. Similar to what has been documented in the literature (Hassan, 2010; Peeraer & Petegem, 2012), the teachers believed that workload and insufficient resources including poor infrastructure and limited expertise were the key barriers. However, leaders did not acknowledge them as the major challenges and completely neglected the institutional limited expertise in providing the teachers effective DLPD. Again, leaders pointed to the teachers' motivation as the most decisive factor influencing their PD. Documentary analysis and supplementary observation of institutional relevant PD confirmed the both the leaders' and teachers' claims and revealed limited expertise and teachers' motivation being the main problems, which is different from the findings from other contexts.

Surprisingly, according to the interviews and document retrieval, some teachers had not received any DLPD over the last two years and there seemed to be a disparity of such opportunities for the teachers and their colleagues at the university. Other hindrances evident in teachers' reflections included inappropriate timing that usually conflicted with teachers' teaching schedules and poor infrastructure and technical support services that frequently caused technical problems. Overall, the DLPD offered by the university did not receive very high ratings by the teachers or even by the leaders. Even those who did have the chance to attend these PD activities did not often have positive experiences and their participation did not always lead to changes in classroom practice.

Due to the obvious lack of effective formal PD, the teachers sought a number of alternatives, which complemented what Hubbard and Levy (2006) reviewed in the literature. Most teachers in this study had learnt to use technology on the job - in their teaching practice. The findings show that a particular strategy for using an application or tool required a lot of practice to develop. Also because of this challenge, such trial and error processes seemed not to be very efficient, especially when many teachers were face-threatened by possible failure. However, due to insufficient and ineffective PD with a focus on DL, self-study was still the strategy that teachers applied and favoured the most and they also believed that it had been the most effective. The second most popular method was peer and group learning. In fact, communities of practice seemed to have potential thanks to the strong

teamwork spirit of the staff. Three types of training (self-studying, learning from colleagues, and attending university-based training) that the teachers in Dang (2009) undertook were also reported by the teachers in this current research. More surprisingly, data from this present study showed the same order of frequency and preference for technology-focused PD. Nevertheless, this current research found that the most desired PD type, shared by all the teachers and leaders, was still mentoring and training, preferably with senior teachers who had adequate TELL expertise. This preference clearly reflected teachers' general awareness of the importance of pedagogy over technology per se in TELL practice, which is well demonstrated in the literature (Graham, 2005; Rahimi & Yadollahi, 2011).

Added to these training methods, the teachers seemed to know other strategies, yet only by name - they had little idea of what was available for them. Generally, the teachers were aware of different ways to develop their DL; however, their practice appeared to be rather limited. Also, as shown in data from the interviews and relevant documents, the teachers, despite claiming positive attitudes and values towards the potential benefits of TELL and DLPD to their profession, were not fully aware of TELL PD opportunities openly available and accessible for them, which really contradicted with the common assumptions about these teachers' activeness and ability to innovate.

4. Implications and conclusion

DLPD needs depend on the teachers' pedagogical approaches and their responsibilities. The teachers' and leaders' seemed to be aware of the quest for DLPD that caters for the teachers' needs at both average and individual levels. Nevertheless, they appeared to be unclear about their professional needs as regards DLPD. They either stated general needs or listed too specific technological skills or tools they wished to master. Most of them were uncertain about what they exactly need beyond a random sum of "nuts and bolts" such as file management. Thus, it is crucial to have measures to identify and analyse teachers' DL and their DLPD needs.

It is implied that institutional recognition of the importance of teachers' DL and DLPD was marginal. Meanwhile, the teachers' motivation appeared to be low and affected by various factors including limited PD opportunities, poor PD organisation and lack of relevant appraisals. Therefore, if teachers are not explicitly encouraged or required to develop their DL, this is not likely to spontaneously occur. Another possible reason for teachers' low participation in DLPD seemed to be voluntary registration. In Vietnamese disciplinary culture, making DLPD compulsory might be more effective, as in Malaysia (Abdullah et al., 2006). However, compliance might be a short-term effect and mandatory DLPD might not be a sustainable solution, especially when teachers were not ready and willing to embrace TELL, as shown in this case and indicated by another study done in the even more disciplinary culture of Singapore (Yeung et al., 2012). More importantly, researchers point to a 'participation gap' which signals unequal access to the opportunities, skills and experiences that will prepare not only teachers but also students for life in the 21st century (Payton & Hague, 2010). In the context of the present research, this digital divide has resulted from the misconceptions of some authorities and even some teachers about students' use of technology and teachers' use of PDAs in classroom practice, as discussed above. This widening gap between the culture of the classroom and that of learners' lives outside classroom involves not only issues of access to technology tools and infrastructure but to the forms of literacy practice in formal and informal settings (Smythe, 2012).

To conclude, despite the consensus among the leaders and teachers that DLPD must be given high priority, the study discovered that the implementation in the Vietnamese context is stronger in rhetoric than in practice. Hopefully, these findings will be taken forward by relevant authorities in improving the efficacy of teachers' DLPD. On a final note, "computers will not replace teachers; however, teachers who use computers will replace teachers who don't" (Ray Clifford, in Healey et al., 2008, p. 2).

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