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A Sociocultural Analysis of Novice EFL Teachers' Professional Development Activities

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Abstract:

This sociocultural theory-based study investigates how professional development activities mediated novice EFL teachers in their teaching careers. Four volunteer novice teachers in their two-year probation time participated in the study. Each novice teacher wrote a narrative every month in a semester and was interviewed at the beginning and end of that semester. Data from all the narratives and interviews disclose that the institutional context with much teaching workload, mandatory research, and involvement in administration-related work provide the affordances for the novice teachers to internalize their understanding of the duties of English lecturers and drive to practice those duties. Besides, the professional development activities in teaching, researching and others are reported to lead to growth in the understanding, experience as well as confidence level of novice teachers. From the findings, implications are put forward to how to provide support to mediate the professional growth of early-career teachers.

Keywords: sociocultural theory, professional development, EFL teachers

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1. Introduction

Socio-cultural theory (SCT) developed by Vygotsky (1978) and his colleagues has been adopted in language education research for its emphasis on considering social and cultural contexts in which interaction mediates the process of learning (Le, 2021). The key concept of SCT- the zone of proximal development (ZPD) has been used in language-related studies to refer to the gains in language outcomes of learners and the professional development of teachers. With an emphasis on the assistance and necessity of the more capable others and cultural artifacts towards the development of novice teachers, SCT is considered to offer insight into how newly-qualified teachers improve professional standards and carry out sustainable professional quality. Besides, understanding the transforming process in the profession of novice teachers is of significance since it reveals the changes in understanding, teaching practice, and teacher agency as well as their beliefs which may contribute to a pedagogical framework for effective teaching (Bui, 2022).

Several studies have dwelled on the topic of teacher professional development (e.g., Ashton, 2020; Eksi & Gungor, 2018; Huang et al, 2021; Mehdizadeh et al., 2023; Sariyildiz, 2017); however, much remains to be explored, especially the specific activities and how they mediate professional transformation of novice teachers at a tertiary context. On this ground, the current study was set out, adopting SCT to analyze the activities mediating novice EFL teachers' professional development.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Professional Development in ELT

The teaching career is associated with professional development (PD) and teachers, especially those at the tertiary level, are required to be researchers, and cooperators to improve professional standards and manifest sustainable professional quality (Jiang, 2017). Professional development activities include those carried out at educational institutions or elsewhere but they are generally grouped into learning, teaching, and researching activities by individuals, under the guidance of supervisors/mentors or in collaboration with others (Cirocki & Farrell, 2019). Some PD activities include informal conversations with colleagues about teaching, ELT workshops, conferences, seminars, individual research, reading materials, ELT training courses and observing classes/ being observed, etc. For PD to take place, questions are raised whether the

institutional climate, and whether teachers are provided with adequate support to grow in their profession (Mohammadi & Moradi, 2017).

2.2. Sociocultural Theory and Professional Development

This paper adopted SCT as the theoretical framework to analyze the PD activities carried out by novice EFL lecturers at a tertiary institution. According to SCT, the mind is mediated, “humans understand and act on the world by means of psychological tools that are appropriated in the context of specific goal-oriented sociocultural activities” (Golombek & Doran, 2014, p. 104). Vygotsky (1978) defined the ZPD as “the distance between the actual development level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem-solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers (p. 86). This concept has been interpreted as the difference between the level of development already obtained and the level of potential development made possible through mediation by more expert others (Golombek & Doran, 2014). Development in SCT indicates “an individual’s cognition emerges in participation in social interaction that is mediated by people, concepts, and interaction” (Johnson & Golombek, 2020, p. 117). This means the experiences that inexperienced teachers have engaged in and their practices in PD activities are vital to their internalization.

From SCT perspective, EFL teachers’ PD can be object-regulated, other-regulated, and self-regulated (Shi, 2017). Firstly, to be object-regulated, EFL teachers are mediated by cognitive tools, for example, English resources, social media, etc. which serve to construct knowledge, consciousness, and reflection which may lead to PD in teaching practice. Secondly, with regards to being other-regulated, assistance from others via communication, supervision, and other teachers, especially experts and more capable teachers are necessary to create new ZPDs. Lastly, to be self-regulated, EFL teachers respond to their work environment, reflect on their teaching, self-study to gain cognitive control for development in their profession.

Tasker, Johnson and Davis (2010) see development as the appropriation of ideas that assimilate with pre-existing knowledge to reconstruct one’s understanding. According to them, “internalization and transformation are individual, based on participation in social activities, and gauged by how these social activities are

manifest” (p. 130). Furthermore, from a sociocultural perspective “within a given time and space, there are constraints and affordances that make certain actions probable, others possible, and yet others impossible” (White, 2018, p. 197). This circumstance contributes to teacher agency that Ashton (2020, p. 3) describes as “something that teachers do and enact in responding to pedagogical challenges, and is mediated and influenced by a specific social context and conditions, and the interplay between these factors and individual efforts”.

Viewing PD through the lens of SCT helps teachers see how it “is constructed by teachers within the settings and circumstances of their work” as well as what activities “transform their understandings of themselves as teachers, their teaching practices, and ultimately the kinds of opportunities they are able to create to support student learning” (Tasker et al., 2010, p. 139). Besides, from the SCT perspective, various means of mediation, namely, tools (materials resources); signs (newsletters and journals); and other humans (professional networks) lead to development in novice teachers which are discussed in the following section.

2.3. Novice Teachers

Farrell (2012) defines novice teachers as “newly qualified teachers”, or “have commenced teaching English in an educational institution usually within three years of completing their teacher education program ” (p. 437). From the SCT perspective, learning involves a novice moving from partial to full participation within a given community, gradually increasing in complexity of their engaged activities to the overall functioning of the community (Chen & Cheng, 2014). However, experienced EFL teachers were more interested in improving their PD activities for teaching literacy than novice ones. Exploring novice teachers’ professional development is thus of significance and viewing it in SCT would shed light on the affordances and constraints that mediate their professional growth (Derakhshan & Nazari, 2022).

2.4. Narrative in SCT

In SCT, narratives are mediating tools for reflection on teachers’ experiences in the classroom and for their PD (Eksi & Gungor, 2018; Johnson, 2009). Narratives help to “analyse how, when, and why new understandings emerge, and understandings

that can lead to transformed conceptualisations of self and transformed modes of engagement in the activities of teaching” (Eksi and Gungor, 2018, p. 160). Through writing reflections, teachers can internalize factors that need to be improved (Ridwan, 2019). Besides, narratives are inquiry-based approaches to gain more self-knowledge and awareness of inner worlds and past experiences (Farrell, 2015). Through narratives, teachers can better make sense of everyday experiences and feelings because they involve the insider knowledge, personal experiences, and ideas that lead their work (Farrell, 2015; Johnson, 2009). For novice teachers, narrative discourse might help them disclose their “conflicting understandings of professional enactments of authority and vulnerability” (Hajmalek & Basiri, 2022, p. 229). For all these reasons, it is worth exploring early-career teachers’ reflections on their professional development.

2.5. Previous Studies

An array of research has focused on novice teachers’ perceptions of what is involved in PD or comparing novice teachers’ perceptions themselves with the experienced ones’. For example, the study by Sariyildiz (2017) compared the perceptions of 34 experienced and 36 novice English language teachers in Turkey in three categories self-initiated PD, PD activities, and obstacles toward PD. Both groups agreed with the initiatives for their own PD and keeping themselves updated with changes in ELT and the importance of classroom observation. However, both groups revealed their disagreement with personal financial problems and excessive workload. The study concluded that exploring novice teachers’ PD brought about insights into the process in which novice teachers are seen to transform themselves into experienced ones.

Other research investigated novice teachers’ awareness, beliefs, understanding, and reflections on PD. For instance, Eksi and Gungor (2018) examined the meaningful experiences of practicum that pre-service teachers considered to help them promote awareness of PD. Eighty-four narratives written by 21 pre-service teachers and oral interviews were inductively analyzed from a sociocultural perspective. The findings reveal that narratives helped them take multiple perspectives upon problems in the practicum context and promoted an increase in their awareness of the variables that impacted teaching and learning. Finally, narratives were reported to some extent to help the teachers activate their problem-solving, reflecting skills, raising their awareness in instructing, managing

classrooms, and engaging learners in the lesson.

Osterling and Webb (2009) analyzed the reflections of pre-service and novice teachers on their personal theoretical beliefs concerning teaching standards. More specifically, the study compared the emergent teaching philosophies of 35 nontraditional graduate students during a 2-year period as they examined and reconstructed their personal and professional identities. Qualitative data analysis reveal that by navigating through a ZPD and adopting a dialogical approach, the pre-service teachers and novice teachers gradually became conscious that education is a moral, humanist profession in which teachers play multiple roles including those of instructors, mentors, student advocates, lifelong learners, and agents of change.

Ashton (2020) used semi-structured interviews to explore the agency of eight novice New Zealand language teachers. The in-depth interviews indicate that novice teachers felt constrained by the amount of time needed to understand the curriculum requirements. They claimed not to have sufficient PD available to support them with their teaching. One reason was that the teachers did not actively seek guidance, thus reinforcing a sense of isolation. Besides, the study shows that novice teachers trialled different approaches aligned with their personal teaching philosophies, and in response to their students' needs.

The study by Huang et al. (2021) focused on the changes in three novice English teachers' teaching beliefs in their first-year learner-teacher transitional period and how these changes influenced their identity formation. The findings on the learning, learning-to-teach and teaching experiences of novice teachers contribute to the understanding of how novice teacher beliefs are formed and transformed, and how those beliefs interact with school contexts in shaping their teacher identity.

In general, the review of the related previous studies indicates that understanding the process of transforming in the profession of novice teachers is of significance since it reveals the changes in understanding, teaching practice, teacher identity and agency. The review also indicates a gap which is to explore what activities mediate the professional transformation of novice teachers in a social-cultural context, especially at a tertiary institution. This study thus aims to fill the gap by seeking answers for the following research questions:

- (1) What PD activities are practiced by novice EFL teachers?
- (2) How do these activities mediate their understanding of PD?

(3) What aspects of PD are reported to be transforming experiences by novice EFL teachers?

3. Methodology

3.1. Participants

This study is a combination of a case study and a narrative one with the selection of participants adopting the convenience sampling approach (Merriam, 2009). Four volunteer teachers who were just recruited by a university in Vietnam, in the age range of 24 to 26, agreed to take part in the study. The participants included one male and three females and were given pseudo names: Manh, Hong, Thanh, and Nhat. They all had obtained their master's degrees in teaching EFL before they were employed. During the time of the current research, they were in probation time of two years. Before the study, they were informed of the study's purpose and the process of writing narratives and answering the interviews during a semester.

3.2. Data Collection and Analysis

Narrative was employed in the current study because it is considered to increase teachers' awareness to some extent "by helping them activate their problem solving, thinking and reflecting skills during the cycle of experiencing, thinking, narrating, and reflecting" (Eksi & Gungor, 2018, p. 171). The open-ended questions for the narratives were adopted from Eksi and Gungor (2018), asking novice teachers to reflect on the activities that contributed to their PD understanding.

At the beginning of the academic year 2021-2022, the participants were guided to write the first narrative focusing on the PD activities they carried out by themselves and with others and how they used the resources at the institution for their work. Then, every month of the semester, each teacher completed another narrative to make up a total of three. The process of writing a narrative recorded each teacher's reflections from the start, the middle and the final month of a semester. Besides, they were interviewed twice, at the beginning and the end of the semester.

Unlike the narrative which captured reflections, the interview asked for the

participants' opinions. More specifically, the interview questions asked the young lecturers about PD activities they experienced/carried out throughout the semester and how these activities shaped their understanding of the profession. The second interview had one more question to ask the teachers about how the activities brought about growth in their PD after a semester. The interviews also helped deepen the understanding of the participants' narratives.

3.3. Coding

Through inductive data analysis (Mackey & Gass, 2005), frequent, dominant, and significant themes that emerged from the narratives were analyzed parallel to the research questions. Interview coding followed the same inductive analysis as for the narratives and served to supplement data from narratives. The coding of the narratives and interview transcripts was adapted from Tavil and Güngör (2017) and Shi (2017), given the reasons that the data from the narratives and interviews both can highlight the themes related to sociocultural mediators, explaining the growth through interactions with oneself, others and objects. To be specific, the self-regulation themes had coded subthemes as reading, attending conferences, and taking part in training courses; the other-regulated theme includes co-researching and co-teaching, and the object-regulated theme includes using resources.

4. Results

4.1. PD Activities Done By Novice Teachers

The 12 narratives written by the four novice teachers and eight interviews with them overall revealed what the teachers did in teaching, training, researching, and other administrative activities. Each of them taught from 5 to 8 EFL classes each week which they considered to be "heavy workload". Besides, all of them reported submitting a research proposal to the university as a requirement for their probation time. For training, they attended several online seminars on teaching methods, online assessments and other issues related to ELT. For example, teacher Manh said in the second interview, "In the last semester, I attended several conferences that pertain to effective methods to teach English in the new period". Similarly, teachers Hong and Thanh said that they attended some seminars about applying technology in English teaching, for example, online assessment and testing; digital tools for

formative assessment practices, and foreign language education 4.0. Besides, teacher Hong reported writing a proposal about pre-service teachers' beliefs about English teaching careers. Teacher Nhat reported participating in various seminars, workshops and conferences.

4.2. Mediated Professional Development Activities

This section presents the findings on the mediation of PD activities. Data from the narratives generally indicate the teachers' understanding of PD relating to teaching, research, and other -related work.

4.2.1. Teaching Work

Below are the excerpts from three narratives by teacher Manh,

Narrative 1: "I was officially appointed a lecturer of English in May, 2021. One mandatory requirement for the candidates who pass the selective entry examination is that they have to undergo the probation period."

Narrative 2: "Before every single lesson, I have to search for information, and knowledge related the lesson topics to understand the specificic terms so that I can give students a detailed explanation in my classes."

Narrative 3: "Through this probation time, I gradually grasp the importance of test design. I ought to have an in-depth understanding of the teaching syllabus and the requirements for skills at particular levels (A1, A2, B1, B2) to create a qualified summative test."

Teacher Manh's understanding of the teaching process has grown toward the end of the semester. At first, the teaching was referred to in a general sense and then in specific issues regarding what to do with the lessons, syllabus and test design as shown in narratives two and three.

The three narratives written by teacher Hong provided information specific to the time of online teaching, during the Covid 19 pandemic:

Narrative 1: "I teach six classes to freshmen who tend to be reluctant to interact with their fellows and teacher. Therefore, I always have to think of ways to promote students' interaction in class such as using Padlet to share ideas and then giving peer-feedback."

Narrative 2: “There was not much change in my teaching compared to last month. I still used the same teaching procedure and applied what I have been doing to better students’ learning.”

Narrative 3: “It was near the end of the semester; therefore, I focused more on letting the students do practice tests and discussed the reasons why students normally get the answers wrong with certain types of questions.”

Teacher Hong’s writings indicated her initiative in teaching and knowledge in preparing and teaching lessons. Like teacher Manh, in the three narratives, teacher Hong mentioned teaching in the first two months and preparing tests for students in the last month.

Teacher Thanh wrote,

Narrative 1: “I taught nine classes and I was familiarizing myself with the teaching job, applying teaching methods, and preparing lesson contents. I also tried to ask for advice from other experienced teachers to teach my classes.”

Narrative 2: “I have been familiar with teaching materials and online teaching as well as how to manage classes and apply some apps. I got an opportunity to be a teaching assistant to a senior teacher. Thanks to her prepared lesson plans and guidance, I learned experience and skills to teach via the university’s LMS.”

Narrative 3: “This month I need to prepare end-of-term tests and I realized that I need to be more careful with notes regarding students’ grade records to complete the end-of-term assessment work smoothly.”

Teacher Thanh’s writings indicate that teaching is also a learning process by getting to know what to do at first, “familiarizing myself”, then gaining experience along the process and finally reflecting on the skills needed for the career.

Teacher Nhat taught more classes and wrote,

Narrative 1: “I have taught 10 online classes of language skills. Teaching these classes, I was able to review the basic theory on teaching language and particularly on teaching English skills as well as strategies and techniques to design lesson plans”.

Narrative 2: “I have read articles and journals to design valid and reliable tests for the mid-term. Besides, because my students have to take online courses for a long time, they are fed up with virtual classes, I try to find ways to encourage them

to participate actively and interactively in the lessons.”

Narrative 3: “Now I have completed all the courses this semester. In terms of skills, I have improved such skills as presenting the lessons, organizing the activities, managing the class and things alike”.

The detailed reflections of teacher Nhat suggest her internalized knowledge and skills “improved” (Teacher Nhat’s words) related to teaching as well as her growing confidence in teaching.

4.2.2. Research Work

In the narratives written by the four teachers, the research work centered on one research proposal but how each of them carried it out reflects a unique way. For example, teacher Manh wrote,

Narrative 1: “I have recently collaborated with my colleague to conduct research to apply communicative activities to improve speaking skills for non-English major students. Honestly, although there were a host of obstacles during the implementation, I obtained hands-on experiences from research writing to analyzing data and showcasing findings.”

Narrative 2: “By getting involved in research implementation, I have become more perseverant to obtain quality findings.”

Narrative 3: “I am currently in the preparatory process to submit this research to my university’s journal”.

The case of teacher Manh indicates growth in understanding of doing research from the first steps to preparing the paper for publication. He considered hands-on experience and being involved in conducting the study gave him integrity for this activity.

Teacher Hong also wrote about her research proposal,

Narrative 1: “I submitted my research proposal about pre-service teachers’ awareness of career competencies. I was quite satisfied with the feedback session about my proposal because I pointed out the incoherent ideas in my proposal to modify it and strengthen my future research.”

Narrative 2: “After receiving constructive feedback from the university board, I continued working on my proposal and rewrite it.”

Narrative 3: “It was a hectic month, so I did not have time to work on my research”

Teacher Hong’s writings show the interruption in her research due to the workload; however, it indicates her understanding and appreciation of the learning process in receiving feedback from more knowledgeable others to continue with her work.

Teacher Thanh wrote about her research work as follows,

Narrative 1: “I wrote a research proposal to submit to the university, it is a university-level research proposal”.

Narrative 2: “This month, I submitted the research proposal to the university for approval”

Narrative 3: “I have withdrawn my research proposal because of my personal circumstance”.

Like other teachers, teacher Thanh made a proposal but she could not carry it out due to her own circumstance.

Teacher Nhật wrote in her three narratives,

Narrative 1: “I had an opportunity to participate in the meeting to give feedback on my research proposal. It helped me to decide the topic and plan what to do in my research.”

Narrative 2: “I am searching the materials related to this topic to read and planning what to do next.”

Narrative 3: “I am reading the materials related to my research topic and collecting useful information to complete the literature review.”

Teacher Nhật’s reflections show her progress in the process of doing research. She did not mention directly that the research selection committee assisted her with her study but the feedback guided her to decide the topic and the plan to carry out the study. The second and third narratives demonstrated her internalized understanding of what to do.

4.2.3. Other Career-related Work

The teachers participating in this study also wrote about other work in their

probation time. For example, teacher Manh wrote,

Narrative 1: “In this month, I had two meetings with my senior faculties to seek instantaneous remedies for the current problems caused by the pandemic. We had to build an online system of teaching and assessment. Those events made me more adaptive to the working environment.”

Narrative 2: “In November, I enrolled for one conference about culture of communication and language teaching. Taking part in this, I amassed beneficial knowledge of foreign language teaching and learning, helping me to improve my teaching methods”.

Narrative 3: “This month, I registered for a conference ‘Foreign Language Education 4.0’, about the application of digital software to ease the pressure in teaching and evaluating. I listened to the study reports from senior researchers, which were eye-openers to me. Especially, I liked the anti-cheating part in doing online tests because it helped with organizing the online final examinations”.

The narratives by teacher Manh indicate his genuine motivation for PD. The self-directed motivation brought him knowledge serving well his teaching. He was also mediated by the presenters and presentations at the conferences.

Teacher Hong also reported her participation in conferences and seminars. Below are the excerpts from her three narratives:

Narrative 1: “This month, I attended two seminars about online assessment and using technology to engage students in online classes. I actually did not learn much from these two seminars because I already applied what the speakers shared.”

Narrative 2: “I did not attend any conferences or workshops in the field of PD.”

Narrative 3: “I attended a conference called ‘Foreign Language Education 4.0’. I was quite impressed by the topics about using technology and even AI in creating interaction with students.”

What teacher Hong wrote in narrative three indicates that novelty in conferences can motivate a novice teacher if that is relevant to the teaching job. Obtaining new knowledge for the immediate matter due to the covid pandemic was reported to be useful to her.

For teacher Thanh, the resources included meetings to learn about her duties and rights as well as professional knowledge.

Narrative 1: “I participated in an annual employee meeting in October, 2021. Thanks to it, I knew the achievements and problems of the department where I was working. I also understood more the responsibilities and benefits of the employees in both teaching and other activities.”

Narrative 2: “I joined an online course given by an American expert on ‘Online assessment and testing’. I gained knowledge about qualities of a good test as well as how to limit cheating in online assessment”.

Narrative 3: “I did not participate in any activities this month”.

Teacher Nhat wrote about the activities she participated,

Narrative 1: “Up to now, I have attended 05 meetings, conferences, seminars and workshops. The meetings were mainly about sharing experience and recommending solutions to online language teaching language.”

Narrative 2: “I attended the online seminar, ‘Digital tools for formative assessment practices in EFL tertiary contexts’ and an international conference about interdisciplinary research in linguistics and language teaching. I gained more knowledge about foreign language teaching and assessment with the use of digital tools to tackle the problems related to conducting online tests.”

Narrative 3: “So far I have attended an online conference held by the training department of my university. This conference aimed at encouraging teachers to share their opinions about teaching online. I also had the chance to share my opinion”.

Teacher Nhat mentioned the opportunity in which she was able to share opinions, showing her participation in the teaching community. Overall, she attended workshops, seminars and training, making use of the resources for self-directed activities.

4.3. The Process of PD

4.3.1. Self-Regulated PD

The narratives recorded the four teachers’ reflections on how they committed themselves to teaching, researching and other related work. The interview transcripts overall show how the teachers mediated themselves via self-regulation. Teacher Manh answered in the first interview, “I’m aware of my position now that I

need to learn more to bridge the gaps between me and other lecturers because I consider myself to be inexperienced and newborn”. The gap here does not mean the age gap but experience, knowledge, and skill gaps. Teacher Manh clearly indicated his initiative to learn from more knowledgeable others but first, the drive came from within himself. He further explained,

“Firstly, the experiences I accumulated via workshops, conferences or courses have enabled me to make a change in my teaching to timely meet students’ needs. Implementing studies or taking part in joint research with my colleagues makes me more self-confident” (Teacher Manh, first interview)

For teacher Hong, at first, she did not know exactly what to do, she answered, “I prepared lesson plans, and looked for materials for teaching and designed assessment tests/exams but I did not have a clear understanding of what I should do next in my teaching career” (first interview). Then in the second interview, she said “I am more aware of what I delivered in the class and always actively seek new opportunities to develop myself.” Although she did not clearly state what she knew regarding her teaching job, she indicated that she understood the need for development in the teaching job.

Teacher Thanh answered, “As I changed job from teaching at a language center to a university, I had to prepare myself psychologically. I have reviewed my strengths to contribute to the department” (First interview). In the second interview, she stated, “I have obtained more understanding of the teaching in a more comprehensive way. The teaching job motivated me to learn, share, and self-assess as well as make necessary changes.” It seemed that she internalized her understanding of her role as a teacher and was more ready for the teaching position.

Self-regulation of teacher Nhat was revealed in the first interview, “I have worked on my language competence to be able to teach university students. Besides, I have read books on effective communication and conducting research”. After a semester, in the second interview, she said, “At first, I just heard of the term “professional development” and also learned about this topic as a subject in my master’s study. However, I did not realize the importance and necessity of PD to my teaching career until I participated in the activities at my university.” She could have taken part in the activities herself or made to join, in either way, she tended to exert self-regulation to progress in her job.

4.3.2. Other-Regulated PD

Each novice teacher in the first two years at the institution was under the supervision of a senior lecturer. Their interaction was thus with the supervisor as well as with other lecturers in the department where they were working.

Teacher Manh answered in the first interview,

“When I need information to teach a course, I will contact my supervisor to ask for advice and he will give me useful strategies and solutions. He reminds me of observing other experienced teachers for and encourages me to consult him and other teachers for advice. He has also sent me relevant materials, for example, the textbooks for teaching and reference materials on how to teach.”

Teacher Manh considered the advice from the supervisor to be helpful for his teaching career, guiding him on what to do to improve his teaching job. Besides, teacher Manh appreciated the meetings with other teachers via regular meetings, he said,

“My department has regular meetings and seminars for me to learn about teaching skills and how to do research. They send me emails to instruct me how to do this and how to do that. I receive messages from them on Zalo very often, which I find very convenient for all lecturers to help each other”. (First interview)

Interaction with teacher Manh, whether in direct or indirect forms, seems to be mediating for his work.

Teacher Hong talked about her communication with the supervisor in the interview, “The supervisor phoned me and told me to make a portfolio about my teaching reflections and observations. I also read a unit description of a course and write my reflections on that unit description.” This activity was not mentioned whether to be helpful to her or not but it indicates she was engaged in activities for professional work. Besides, teacher Hong was assisted via interaction with the department board. She said in the interview,

“The department board instructed me to do research at the university level. The head of the primary teaching section gave me recordings of two teachers’ classes to listen to and learn from their actual teaching. Thanks to that I gained knowledge and experience in teaching English to young learners.”

The guidance from the department board was reported to bring knowledge and understanding to teacher Hong specializing in teaching English to young learners.

Teacher Thanh mentioned her communication with her supervisor in a rather different way, “The supervisor explained to me about the responsibilities and benefits in the probation time so that I can develop myself and know what in specific I need to focus on to teach students”. For interaction with other teachers in the department, teacher Thanh said,

“I can ask for information from the Zalo group with other teachers who usually respond in a quick way and advise me to contact the responsible teachers/staff to get the correct information for my situation. It takes about 15 minutes to have a reply or advice, which helps me with my problem-solving”.

The community of teachers in the Zalo application seemed to be mediating to teacher Thanh. She mentioned that she asked other young/novice teachers for shared information for the courses she taught to quickly know what she needed to do with her job. Besides, she received other advice, “The dean talked to me about the responsibilities of a lecturer, with academic work, and work with students. The head of the skills section advised me about the courses that are suitable with my competence.” Teacher Thanh appreciated the experience to co-teach with a senior teacher to broaden her understanding of teaching,

“One senior teacher has an online course with PowerPoint slides and lesson plans on LMS prepared and I co-taught with her. This experience brought me the understanding of the syllabus and how the activities in the classes should be carried out.” (first interview)

The excerpt of the interview transcript above suggested that teacher Thanh was mediated by the co-teaching to lead to her more understanding related to her teaching job.

Similarly, teacher Nhat described her communication with the supervisor to be helpful,

“My supervisor guided me on how to work, make lesson plans, and mark students’ papers. She gave me opportunities to teach and she observed my teaching to give me feedback. Without her feedback I would not have known how to teach effectively.” (first interview)

The interaction via feedback and guidance from the supervisor was seen to lead to the reported more effective teaching of teacher Nhat. She further provided information,

“Besides, there are seminars and informal talks by other lecturers in the department to instruct me how to teach online, and deal with unexpected situations when teaching online. I have been guided by one senior lecturer to make students’ profiles and mark records.” (first interview)

The apprentice was carried out with different roles which teacher Nhat considered to contribute to her learning as a novice teacher.

4.3.3. Object-Regulated Professional Development

Making use of resources is emphasized in PD activities. The teachers in this study reported that they made use of the resources at the institution and elsewhere for their PD. For instance, teacher Manh said in the first interview,

“When I first started teaching, I experienced my own problems. Then, I searched youtube to get solutions, for example, how to teach large classes”.

Teacher Hong stated that not all the resources worked for her, especially, when there are too many resources in the form of assignments and online materials.

“The university funded me to join a six-week online course on applying technology in teaching English. The course instructor gave lots of assignments and interesting feedback. After the course, I realized it took lots of time to design the assignments but I could not apply all that I have learned into my teaching”. (First interview)

Teacher Thanh mentioned in the interview the teaching materials and clear class schedules assisted her in her teaching. She said,

“The university provides a wide range of useful materials. For example, when I use Northstar books, there are teachers’ books, achievement tests, offline and online links, and self-study kits for students. I was also given the class schedules to know exactly what I need to do with time management. So I feel confident.”

Teacher Nhat answered in the interview about the university resources, “The working environment is professional and the university supplies us with a good source of materials. However, I just know about the journals from my university. But I am not sure about e-journals and whether our university has e-journals.” (Teacher Nhat, first interview)

4.4. Reported Growth in Professional Development

This part aims to answer the third research question, the activities that were reported to transform the novice teachers, bringing the growth in PD experienced by novice teachers. As mentioned in the previous parts, the participants narrated that the activities related to teaching, researching, and other activities via self-regulation, object regulation and other regulations brought them growth, confidence, and experience in their teaching career. Realizing a lecturer's main role is an indication of gaining PD knowledge. For example, teacher Manh responded in the second interview,

“As a lecturer, I have to wear a lot of hats, teaching is not the primary duty anymore. I ought to take other roles such as a researcher who normally conducts class-based studies or a learner who is willing to continue further education to catch up with up-to-the-minute changes in my current field, or a cooperater who can work well with other colleagues or experts in the same aspects.”

The excerpt illustrates a rather comprehensive understanding of the lecturer after a semester of teaching at the university. Teacher Manh further explained in the second interview,

“Professional development itself helps to build a firm background for me. Firstly, the experiences I accumulated via workshops, conferences or courses enable me to make a change in the teaching methodology to timely suit students' needs and development. Besides, implementing studies or take part in joint research with my colleagues make me more self-confident. The courses provided me with invaluable knowledge and skills so as to perform better in my job”.

The development in the understanding of the duties of a lecturer is also shown in the second interview with teacher Hong,

“I am more aware of what I delivered in the class and always actively seek new opportunities to develop myself. I reflected on my own teaching based on students' performance. I sought advice and recommendations from colleagues for the useful resources or alternative applications for some certain lessons.”

The answer by teacher Hong shows the mediation that comes from within her own drive, from the available resources and other colleagues that helped her to draw out understanding of what to do to perform her roles better.

For teacher Thanh, her understanding of the teaching job involves not only knowledge of teaching, research but also with administrative work,

“The teaching job motivated me to learn, share, and self assess as well as make necessary changes in my teaching. I have formed an inquiring mind in teaching and doing other related activities. I understood how to use materials and processes of teaching as well as managing and exchanging with students in and out of the classrooms. I’ve learned how to become a student advisor and the organizations of all offices and departments” (Second interview)

After a semester, teacher Thanh gained the motivation, the inquiring mind and the experience for the teaching job. She further stated,

“It can be said that these activities help me go on the right track in my teaching career. I have also developed my critical thinking in my teaching and studying. Now I become more confident, to take charge of the assigned courses, and to do the research on my own”. (Second interview)

Teacher Nhat, her second interview answer indicates the growth in her personal skills for her career,

“I gained more knowledge and improved skills in my teaching career. I can design lesson plans, implement appropriate strategies as well as organize the activities effectively in class. I also improve my self-study skills and research skill. Moreover, I learned how to arrange and do my work more logically.”

The internalized knowledge and skills that teacher Nhat appreciated is self-study skills that she used for her professional job.

5. Discussion

This study set out to examine the PD activities that novice teachers experienced, how they mediated the teachers in their probation time, and the reported growth in their PD. Twelve narratives written in a period of three months by the four teachers and eight interviews with them were collected for analysis. From Vygotsky’s SCT, data coming from narratives and interviews are based on the specific instructional and social activities in which teachers engage (Johnson, 2009) and narratives are socially and culturally bound and cannot be separated from sociocultural contexts they emerged (Golombek & Johnson, 2004). Therefore, it is considered that teachers’ narratives and interviews represent “socially mediated view of experience

in the local context and put forward suggestions” for a teaching program (Eksi & Gungor, 2018, p. 172). In the current study, the narratives uncover the fact that EFL teachers in Vietnam are required to teach a large amount of work, attend numerous meetings, engaging in various academic activities in the years before they become tenured lecturers. It is through the narratives and interviews that the early-career teachers realized they had internationalized knowledge of the expected roles of teachers and what they needed to improve themselves in teaching. All four participants in this study seemed to grow from what they did not exactly know about the teaching job to appreciating the working environment which required much from them but gave them affordances for growth. Narratives in this study tended to serve as a tool for teachers to realize the transformation and internalization of their understanding of professional development activities ranging from teaching workload, research and administrative work, communication with supervisors and other career-related work.

Another finding of this study indicates that all the participants desired more PD and they showed initiatives to seek additional guidance. The drive could come from the fact that the two-year probation time was for them to prove themselves to be ready for full employment and it also comes from the fact that these novice teachers were working in an environment where others exert commitment to the teaching job and they were mediated by the other senior and more experienced lecturers.

The narratives and interview transcripts of the teachers in the current study illustrate how teacher agency and actions are mediated by the context (Ashton, 2020; White, 2018). For example, for all four teachers reported the institution's environment provided affordances in creating opportunities for them to complete their work, and build their development in careers, which is different from what was found in the study by Ashton (2020) which indicated that novice teachers felt constrained by the amount of time needed to understand the curriculum requirements and a lack of professional development available to support them with their teaching.

The institutional context where the novice teachers were working could have been a factor leading to their understanding and make use of the affordances to grow. Similar to the finding of the study by Osterling and Webb (2009) which revealed that the pre-service teachers and novice teachers gradually became conscious that teachers play multiple roles including those of instructors, mentors,

student advocates, lifelong learners, and agents of change, the teachers in the current study realized they had to “wear a lot of hats” (Teacher Manh’s words). Their apprenticeship made them aware that they should be ready for a range of tasks, and prepare themselves for lifelong PD.

6. Conclusion

This SCT-based study investigated how professional development activities mediated novice teachers in their English teaching careers. It was found that the institutional context with much teaching workload, mandatory research and involvement in administration-related work provided the affordances for the novice teachers to internalize their understanding of the lecturers’ duties of English in their probation time. The activities were reported to lead to growth in the understanding, experience as well as the confidence level of the novice teachers.

The current study’s findings provide some implications for professional support for novice teachers at tertiary institutions. First, it highlights the need for more focus on supporting early-career teachers in developing a more in-depth understanding of the duties of a lecturer, their commitment to learn and internalize knowledge and skills from training workshops to apply them to the teaching contexts and to meet the requirement of conducting research on their own. The participants in this study were aware of their own agency but they needed guidance to be able to identify and articulate their needs for professional support.

The current study was limited to data from reflections written in narratives by novice teachers and interviews with them. The reflections somehow depended on the memories of the past events even though the participants were given guiding questions and completed them each month. Further studies are suggested to explore how and to what extent PD activities work in the field of ELT.

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