Exploring the Impact of Scholarly Writing on Professional Development and Reflective Practices among Vietnamese Tertiary EFL Teachers: A Qualitative Inquiry

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Abstract

This qualitative study investigates the perceptions of Vietnamese tertiary English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers on the role of writing scientific journal articles in their professional development and its contribution to their reflective teaching practices. Nine EFL teachers from two Vietnamese tertiary institutions, representing novice, mid-career, and near-end career stages, participated in semi-structured interviews. Thematic analysis was employed to interpret the data, grounded in reflective practice theory and situated learning theory. The findings reveal that teachers across all career stages perceive scholarly writing as a crucial component of their professional growth. Novice teachers viewed it as a reflective tool for self-discovery and skill enhancement, mid-career teachers as a means for consolidating experiences and contributing to the field, and near-end teachers as an avenue for mentorship and legacy building. Additionally, the study found that scholarly writing significantly fosters reflective teaching practices, enhancing self-reflection, pedagogical innovation, and mentoring across different career stages. The study highlights the multifaceted role of scholarly writing in professional development and reflective practices of EFL teachers. It underscores the need for tailored support for scholarly writing at various stages of a teaching career, emphasizing its value not only in academic contribution but also in enhancing teaching quality. The findings suggest that engagement in scholarly writing is a powerful catalyst for professional and pedagogical growth among EFL teachers, particularly in the evolving educational context of Vietnam.

Keywords: Vietnamese EFL teachers; scholarly writing; professional development; reflective teaching practices; qualitative study.

Introduction

In the evolving landscape of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) education, reflective teaching practices have emerged as a pivotal component for professional development (Motallebzadeh, Ahmadi, & Hosseinnia, 2018; Nguyen, 2017). This qualitative study delves into the intersection of reflective teaching and scholarly writing among Vietnamese tertiary EFL teachers. The impetus for this research stems from the growing emphasis on scholarly publication in academia and its potential role in fostering reflective practices among educators. The primary research questions guiding this study are:

1. How do Vietnamese tertiary EFL teachers perceive the process of writing scientific journal articles as a part of their professional development?
2. In what ways does the activity of writing scientific journal articles contribute to the reflective teaching practices of Vietnamese tertiary EFL teachers?

The significance of these questions lies in their potential to uncover the role of academic writing in teacher development and to explore how the demanding process of manuscript preparation and publication can act as a catalyst for reflection and pedagogical growth. This inquiry is particularly relevant in the Vietnamese context, where the educational system is undergoing rapid transformation and where there is an increasing push towards internationalization and scholarly output.

Reflective teaching, a concept extensively discussed in educational literature (Dewey, 1933; T. S. C. Farrell, 2013; Thomas S. C. Farrell, 2015; D.A. Schon, 1983; D. A. Schon, 1987; Schön, 2017) involves teachers critically examining their classroom practices, with the aim of continuous improvement and adaptation to the dynamic educational environment. Scholarly writing, especially the crafting of journal articles, demands a similar level of introspection and critical analysis (Benesch, 2001). This study posits that the process of writing for academic journals can serve as a reflective practice, enabling teachers to systematically examine and articulate their teaching methodologies, challenges, and successes.

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Given the scant research on the intersection of academic writing and reflective teaching in the Vietnamese EFL context, this study aims to fill this gap. It seeks to provide insights into how the discipline of writing scientific journal articles can influence teachers' pedagogical beliefs, classroom practices, and professional identity. This exploration is crucial in understanding the broader implications of scholarly writing as a professional development tool in the field of EFL education, particularly within the unique socio-cultural and educational milieu of Vietnam.

**Literature Review**

**Reflective Teaching Practices**

Reflective teaching, a concept rooted in Dewey (1933) work on reflective thinking, has gained considerable traction in the field of education. According to Zeichner and Liston (1996), reflective teaching is a process where teachers critically examine their actions and decisions in the classroom to improve their teaching practice. Thomas S. C. Farrell (2015) emphasizes that reflective teaching involves a cyclic process of planning, teaching, observing, and reflecting. In the EFL context, this practice is crucial due to the diverse linguistic, cultural, and educational backgrounds of learners. Studies have shown that reflective teaching positively impacts teacher efficacy and student learning outcomes (T. S. C. Farrell, 2013; Richards & Lockhart, 1994). In the Asian context, Nguyen (2017) found that Vietnamese teachers who engaged in reflective practices felt more empowered and better equipped to address classroom challenges.

**Scholarly Writing and Professional Development**

The nexus between academic writing and professional development has been explored in various studies. Borg (2010) and Hyland (2015) contended that scholarly writing, particularly the process of journal article preparation, is a form of professional development that encourages deep engagement with subject matter and pedagogical strategies. This process often leads to the development of critical thinking and analytical skills Allen (2004). In the context of EFL education, scholarly writing assumes additional significance. Xu (2014) argued that EFL educators often engage in scholarly writing to contribute to the discourse in the field, thereby enhancing their professional identity and practice. However, challenges such as linguistic barriers, access to resources, and publication pressures can impact this process, especially in non-native English speaking contexts (Tsui & Tollefson, 2017; Woodward-Kron, 2007).

A burgeoning area of research is the intersection of reflective teaching and scholarly writing. According to Bishop (2013) the act of writing for academic purposes can be inherently reflective, as it requires educators to articulate and scrutinize their pedagogical choices and classroom experiences. Tavakoli and Howard (2012) supported this view, suggesting that the process of writing for publication prompts teachers to reflect on their teaching practices and beliefs.

In Vietnam, the demand for English proficiency and the push for internationalization in higher education have led to significant changes in the EFL landscape (Tran & Tanemura, 2020). These changes necessitate a deeper understanding of how Vietnamese EFL teachers adapt and grow professionally. While there is extensive literature on reflective teaching and scholarly writing separately, limited research exists on how these practices intersect in the Vietnamese context, particularly at the tertiary level.

**Methods**

**Research Design**

This study adopts a qualitative research design, specifically utilizing semi-structured interviews to explore the experiences of Vietnamese tertiary EFL teachers in their engagement with scholarly writing and its influence on their reflective teaching practices. This methodological choice is anchored in the interpretivist paradigm, which posits that reality is socially constructed and best understood through the subjective experiences and interpretations of individuals (Creswell & Poth, 2016). By employing semi-structured interviews, the study aims to capture the nuanced, personal insights of EFL teachers, allowing for an in-depth exploration of their perceptions, beliefs, and experiences.

The theoretical frameworks underpinning this study are reflective practice theory and situated learning theory. Reflective practice theory, primarily influenced by (D.A. Schon, 1983; D. A. Schon, 1987; Schön, 2017) work, posits that professionals develop their understanding and expertise through the process of
reflecting on their experiences, particularly the challenges and uncertainties they encounter. This theory underscores the importance of reflection in professional development and is central to understanding how scholarly writing can serve as a tool for reflective teaching.

Situated learning theory, as proposed by Lave and Wenger (1991) complements this by emphasizing the social and contextual nature of learning. It posits that learning, including professional development, occurs through participation in social practices and communities of practice. This perspective is crucial for understanding how the social context of academic writing, such as interactions with peer reviewers and editors, influences teachers’ reflective practices.

In applying these frameworks, the study seeks to understand not only the individual reflective processes of EFL teachers as they engage in scholarly writing but also how these processes are shaped by their participation in the broader academic community. The semi-structured interviews are designed to elicit rich, detailed narratives that reveal how teachers perceive the impact of scholarly writing on their teaching practices, the challenges they face, and the strategies they employ in navigating these challenges. This approach allows for a comprehensive exploration of the interplay between individual reflection and social learning in the professional development of Vietnamese tertiary EFL teachers.

Participants

The participants of this study comprised a purposively selected group of nine Vietnamese EFL teachers, drawn from two distinct educational institutions in Vietnam. This selection aimed to ensure a diverse representation of experiences and perspectives within the scope of the research. The participant group was stratified across different stages of their teaching careers to capture a range of insights and reflections. Specifically, the group included three novice teachers, defined as having less than five years of teaching experience, three mid-career teachers with five to fifteen years of experience, and three teachers nearing the end of their careers with over fifteen years of experience. This stratification was crucial in understanding how reflective teaching practices and engagement with scholarly writing might evolve over the course of a teaching career. The selection of participants was guided by the criterion of having engaged in scholarly writing, either through publication in academic journals or active participation in the process of academic writing. This criterion ensured that all participants had relevant experiences to contribute to the study’s exploration of the intersection between scholarly writing and reflective teaching practices.

In conducting the study, ethical considerations were paramount. All participants were provided with a clear explanation of the study’s purpose, its procedures, and the intended use of its findings. They were assured of confidentiality and anonymity, with pseudonyms used in place of real names in any published material. Informed consent was obtained from each participant, ensuring they were aware of their right to withdraw from the study at any point without any negative consequences. Additionally, care was taken to avoid any potential power imbalances between the researchers and the participants, particularly given the sensitive nature of discussing personal and professional experiences. This ethical approach was fundamental to creating a respectful and trustworthy environment conducive to honest and open sharing of experiences and reflections.

Data Collection

The primary method of data collection in this study was through semi-structured interviews, which allowed for flexibility in exploring the experiences and perceptions of the participants while maintaining a certain degree of consistency across interviews. Prior to conducting the main interviews, a pilot study was carried out with two EFL teachers who did not participate in the main study. This preliminary step was instrumental in refining the interview questions and ensuring their relevance and clarity in the context of Vietnamese EFL teachers’ experiences.

Following the pilot study, the interview questions were revised to better align with the study’s research questions and theoretical frameworks. Some of the key interview questions included: “How do you describe your experience with writing for academic journals in relation to your teaching practice?”, “In what ways has scholarly writing influenced your reflection on your teaching methods?”, and “Can you share any specific instances where writing for publication led to changes in your teaching approach?” These questions were designed to elicit detailed and reflective responses from the participants.
The interviews were conducted in Vietnamese, the participants’ first language, to ensure comfort and clarity in expressing their thoughts. For participants who were more comfortable in English, the option was provided, but all chose to conduct the interviews in Vietnamese. Each interview lasted approximately 60 to 90 minutes, providing ample time for in-depth discussion. The interviews were conducted in locations chosen by the participants, typically their offices or quiet public spaces, to ensure a comfortable and private setting conducive to open conversation.

All interviews were audio-recorded with the participants’ consent, and then transcribed verbatim for analysis. The use of the participants’ native language, Vietnamese, necessitated subsequent translation of the transcripts into English for analysis purposes. Care was taken to maintain the authenticity and nuances of the participants’ expressions during the translation process. The combination of a thoughtful interview design, the consideration of language preferences, and the respectful and ethical conduct of interviews were critical in ensuring the collection of rich, meaningful data for the study.

Data Analysis

The data collected from the semi-structured interviews underwent a meticulous process of thematic analysis, a method well-suited for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns or themes within qualitative data. This approach was chosen for its flexibility and effectiveness in organizing and describing the dataset in rich detail, and for its ability to interpret various aspects of the research topic (Braun, Clarke, & Hayfield, 2023).

The first step in the thematic analysis was the transcription of the recorded interviews. Following the transcription, the data was read and re-read multiple times to gain a deep familiarity and to start noting initial ideas. This immersive engagement with the data was crucial for the subsequent stages of analysis. Coding was the next critical step. During this phase, the data was methodically coded in an iterative process, where extracts of data were identified and coded in a systematic fashion across the entire dataset. These codes were organized into potential themes by collating all the relevant coded data extracts under the identified themes. This stage involved a constant movement back and forth between the dataset, the coded extracts, and the developing themes, ensuring a coherent and meaningful pattern.

The themes were then reviewed and refined. This involved checking if the themes worked in relation to the coded extracts and the entire dataset, and generating a thematic ‘map’ of the analysis. This step was crucial for ensuring that the themes accurately reflected the data and answered the research questions. Finally, the themes were defined and named, giving a clear identity to each theme and uncovering the essence of what each theme captured about the data. The analysis culminated in a detailed and rich narrative that related back to the research questions and the literature, providing insights into the experiences and perceptions of Vietnamese tertiary EFL teachers regarding scholarly writing and its influence on their reflective teaching practices.

Throughout the analysis, reflexivity was maintained, where the researchers continuously reflected on their assumptions, preconceptions, and potential biases. This reflexivity was essential to ensure the credibility and validity of the analysis, providing a trustworthy interpretation of the data that contributed meaningfully to the field of EFL education.

Findings

Vietnamese Tertiary EFL Teachers’ Perceptions on the Process of Writing Scientific Journal Articles as a Part of Their Professional Development

The findings of this study shed light on how Vietnamese tertiary EFL teachers perceive the process of writing scientific journal articles as a part of their professional development. A key finding was the perception of scholarly writing as a reflective tool for professional growth, a sentiment echoed by all nine participants across different career stages.

Among the novice teachers, scholarly writing was seen as a challenging yet rewarding journey of self-discovery and skill development. One novice teacher remarked, “Writing for journals is like holding a mirror to my teaching methods; it forces me to think deeply about what I do in the classroom.” This statement aligns with the principles of reflective practice theory, as it illustrates how the process of writing compels teachers to
introspect and evaluate their teaching practices critically. From the perspective of situated learning theory, this process can be seen as an entry point into the community of practice of academic writers, where novices learn and adapt through participation and reflection.

For mid-career teachers, scholarly writing served as a means to consolidate their experiences and contribute to the field. One mid-career teacher shared, “Through writing, I can articulate my years of classroom experiences and share my insights with a wider audience.” This reflects the aspect of reflective practice theory where experienced practitioners use reflection to make sense of and communicate their accumulated knowledge. Situated learning theory further explains this as the mid-career teachers’ active participation in the community of practice, not just as learners but also as contributors.

Teachers nearing the end of their careers viewed scholarly writing as a legacy-building activity. One such teacher expressed, “Writing articles allows me to leave a mark in the field, passing on what I have learned.” This perspective resonates with reflective practice theory, where experienced practitioners use reflection not only for personal development but also for influencing others. From the lens of situated learning theory, these near-end teachers are seen as seasoned members of the community, who use writing as a means to mentor and guide newer members, thereby sustaining the community’s knowledge and practices.

**Contribution of Writing Scientific Journal Articles to Reflective Teaching Practices**

Addressing the second research question, the study found that writing scientific journal articles significantly contributes to the reflective teaching practices of Vietnamese tertiary EFL teachers. This contribution manifested in various ways across the different career stages of the teachers.

The novice teachers reported that engaging in scholarly writing deepened their self-reflection. One novice teacher explained, “Writing about my teaching made me question and rethink my approaches. It is like a continuous cycle of teaching, reflecting, writing, and improving.” This statement illustrates the concept of reflective practice theory, where the act of writing facilitates deeper introspection and critical assessment of one’s teaching methods. In terms of situated learning theory, this process signifies the novice teachers’ initial foray into the community of academic writing, where reflection is both a personal and a communal activity, contributing to their professional identity formation.

Mid-career teachers highlighted that writing articles pushed them towards pedagogical innovation. One mid-career teacher noted, “I find myself experimenting more in the classroom to have richer experiences to write about.” This observation reflects reflective practice theory, where writing acts as a stimulant for teachers to explore new teaching strategies and reflect on their effectiveness. From a situated learning perspective, this indicates the mid-career teachers’ active engagement in the community of practice, where they not only absorb knowledge but also contribute new ideas and approaches.

For the near-end teachers, writing scientific articles was seen as a means to mentor younger teachers and leave a lasting impact. A seasoned teacher shared, “My articles are a way to pass on my experiences and wisdom to new teachers.” This reflects the aspect of reflective practice theory where experienced teachers use reflective writing to distill and transmit their knowledge. In terms of situated learning theory, these teachers occupy a mentorship role within the academic community, using their writings to guide and influence the practices of less experienced members.

**Discussion**

The current study’s findings on the perceptions of Vietnamese tertiary EFL teachers regarding the role of writing scientific journal articles in their professional development present both similarities and distinct differences when compared to existing literature. These differences are particularly significant as they contribute new insights to the field of EFL education and the understanding of professional development through scholarly writing.

Consistent with existing research, this study found that EFL teachers at all career stages perceive scholarly writing as an integral component of their professional development. This aligns with studies by Borg (2010) and Hyland (2015) which emphasize the role of academic writing in deepening teachers’ engagement with their subject matter and pedagogical strategies. The finding that novice teachers view scholarly writing as a

However, this study diverges from existing literature in several key aspects. Firstly, it provides a nuanced understanding of how teachers at different career stages in the Vietnamese context uniquely engage with scholarly writing. Unlike previous studies that often treat EFL teachers as a homogenous group, this study reveals that mid-career and near-end teachers use scholarly writing not just for self-reflection but also as a means of contributing to the field and mentoring newer teachers. This finding expands on the work of Johnson (2015) by illustrating how scholarly writing serves as a legacy and mentorship tool, a perspective not extensively explored in earlier studies.

Additionally, this study's application of situated learning theory to understand the contributions of scholarly writing to reflective teaching practices offers a novel perspective. While previous research has acknowledged the role of communities of practice in professional development (Lave & Wenger, 1991) this study specifically illuminates how participation in the academic writing community facilitates different forms of engagement and learning across career stages. This application provides a deeper understanding of the social dimensions of reflective teaching practices, which has been less emphasized in prior research.

Furthermore, the emphasis on the Vietnamese context adds a unique contribution to the literature. The specific challenges and opportunities faced by Vietnamese EFL teachers in scholarly writing and reflective practices are underrepresented in global academic discourse. This study, therefore, enriches the understanding of how contextual factors influence the professional development of EFL teachers, particularly in non-native English speaking countries facing rapid educational transformations.

**Conclusion**

The study embarked on an exploration of how Vietnamese tertiary EFL teachers perceive the process of writing scientific journal articles as a part of their professional development and the ways in which this activity contributes to their reflective teaching practices. Set against the backdrop of an evolving educational landscape in Vietnam, where scholarly writing and reflective practices are increasingly emphasized, this qualitative study employed semi-structured interviews to delve into the experiences and perceptions of nine EFL teachers from two institutions, representing various career stages.

Methodologically, the study utilized thematic analysis to interpret the data obtained from these interviews. This approach facilitated an in-depth understanding of the participants’ perspectives, encompassing both novice and experienced educators. The findings revealed that teachers across different career stages perceived scholarly writing as a critical tool for professional growth, with each group deriving unique benefits. Novice teachers saw it as a journey of self-discovery and skill development, mid-career teachers as a means to consolidate experiences and contribute to the field, and near-end teachers as an opportunity for mentorship and legacy building. Additionally, the study highlighted that scholarly writing significantly contributes to reflective teaching practices, fostering deeper self-reflection, pedagogical innovation, and mentoring.

The implications of these findings are multifaceted. For EFL educators, particularly in Vietnam, the study underscores the value of scholarly writing as a catalyst for professional development. It suggests that engagement in academic writing can enhance reflective practices, leading to more effective and innovative teaching methods. For teacher educators and policymakers, these insights emphasize the need to support and encourage scholarly writing among teachers, not only as a means of contributing to academic discourse but also as a vital component of their professional growth and reflective practice. Furthermore, the study highlights the importance of considering the career stage of teachers when designing and implementing professional development programs. Tailoring these programs to the unique needs and experiences of teachers at different points in their careers can maximize the benefits derived from scholarly writing.

In conclusion, this study contributes to the understanding of the role of scholarly writing in the professional development of EFL teachers. It provides evidence that scholarly writing is not just an academic exercise, but a powerful tool for reflection, innovation, and growth. By highlighting the diverse ways in which teachers at different career stages engage with scholarly writing, the study offers valuable insights for enhancing the quality of EFL education in Vietnam and beyond.
Limitations and Recommendations for Further Studies

This study, while providing valuable insights, is not without its limitations. Firstly, the scope of the study was limited to nine Vietnamese tertiary EFL teachers from only two institutions, which may not fully represent the diverse experiences and perceptions of all EFL teachers in Vietnam. The qualitative nature of the study, focusing on in-depth insights from a small group, means that the findings might not be generalizable to a larger population. Additionally, the study relied solely on self-reported data from semi-structured interviews, which could be subject to biases such as self-presentation or recall bias. Another limitation lies in the language aspect; although the interviews were conducted in Vietnamese for comfort and clarity, the subsequent translation into English for analysis might have led to the loss of some nuances in the participants’ expressions.

Given these limitations, future research could aim to include a larger and more diverse sample of EFL teachers, possibly encompassing various regions and types of educational institutions in Vietnam. This would help in obtaining a more comprehensive understanding of the role of scholarly writing in EFL teachers’ professional development across different contexts. Additionally, employing a mixed-methods approach could enrich the findings; quantitative data could complement the qualitative insights, providing a broader picture of the impact of scholarly writing on reflective teaching practices. Further studies might also explore the impact of external factors, such as institutional support, access to resources, and the role of peer networks, on the engagement of EFL teachers with scholarly writing. Such research could provide deeper insights into how contextual factors influence the professional development of EFL teachers and inform more targeted and effective support strategies.

References


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