Enhancing Reflective Teaching in Vietnamese Tertiary Education: Exploring the Role of Organizational Support in EFL Teachers’ Professional Development

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Abstract

This qualitative study explores the organizational supports necessary for effective reflective teaching practices among Vietnamese tertiary English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers and how these supports contribute to their professional development. Conducted within the specific context of Vietnam’s rapidly evolving educational landscape, the study involved semi-structured interviews with nine tertiary EFL teachers from two institutions, representing a range of career stages: novice, mid-career, and near-end career. The thematic analysis revealed a significant need for structured professional development programs focused on reflective teaching methodologies. Teachers across all career stages emphasized the importance of such programs, highlighting their role in enhancing teaching efficacy and pedagogical skills. The findings were interpreted through the lenses of Reflective Practice Theory and Organizational Support Theory, underscoring the importance of institutional support in the professional growth and reflective practices of teachers. The study contributes to the field by highlighting the specific needs and perceptions of Vietnamese tertiary EFL teachers regarding organizational support, offering insights for educational administrators and policymakers. It emphasizes the necessity for tailored professional development initiatives and institutional cultures that foster reflective teaching. These findings have implications for the enhancement of teaching practices and the professional development of EFL teachers, not only in Vietnam but in similar contexts globally.

Keywords: EFL teachers; professional development; reflective teaching; role of organizational support; Vietnamese tertiary education.

Introduction

Reflective teaching practices represent a cornerstone in the professional development of educators worldwide. This qualitative study focuses on Vietnamese tertiary English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers, exploring the necessary organizational supports that facilitate their reflective teaching practices. Reflective teaching, an introspective process, enables educators to critically assess and adapt their teaching methods and strategies to enhance student learning outcomes (Schön, 1983, 1987, 2017). In the context of Vietnamese tertiary education, this practice assumes a significant role given the unique challenges and opportunities presented by the EFL environment (Hung & Thuy, 2021; Nguyen, 2017; Tuan, 2021).

The research questions guiding this study are twofold:

1. What organizational supports are perceived as necessary by Vietnamese tertiary EFL teachers to engage effectively in reflective teaching practices?

This question seeks to understand the specific institutional supports, resources, and environments that EFL teachers in Vietnam identify as crucial for fostering a reflective approach to their teaching. It explores aspects such as administrative support, professional training opportunities, access to resources, and collaborative networks among teachers.

2. How do these supports contribute to the professional development of Vietnamese tertiary EFL teachers?

The second question delves into the impact of these organizational supports on teachers’ professional growth. It examines how such supports influence teachers’ ability to reflect on their practices, adapt to diverse educational contexts, and enhance their pedagogical skills. The focus is on understanding the interplay between organizational support and the continuous professional development of EFL teachers.

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The study adopts a qualitative methodology, employing in-depth interviews with Vietnamese tertiary EFL teachers. This approach allows for a comprehensive understanding of the lived experiences and perceptions of these educators. The findings are expected to offer valuable insights into the development of supportive structures and policies that can foster reflective teaching practices, thereby contributing to the professional growth of EFL teachers in Vietnam and potentially in similar educational contexts globally.

**Literature Review**

*Reflective Teaching in EFL Contexts*

Reflective teaching, as conceptualized by Schön (1983); Schön (1987) and Schön (2017) involves teachers’ active engagement in reflecting on their teaching practices to foster continuous professional growth. In the field of EFL, this concept has garnered considerable attention. Farrell (2013) and Farrell (2015) emphasized its critical role in helping teachers navigate the complexities of diverse linguistic and cultural classrooms. Reflective teaching in EFL settings, as highlighted by Richards and Lockhart (1994) involves a cyclic process of planning, action, observation, and reflection. This process is particularly pertinent in the Vietnamese context, where rapid educational reforms and increasing international integration pose new challenges and opportunities for EFL teachers (Ryu & Nguyen, 2021).

*Organizational Support for Reflective Teaching*

The literature underscores the importance of organizational support in facilitating reflective teaching. Pollard et al. (2018) argued that reflective teaching requires not just individual effort but also an enabling environment provided by educational institutions. This perspective is supported by Akbari (2007) who identified institutional culture, administrative support, and access to professional development resources as key factors influencing teachers’ reflective practices. In the context of Vietnam, Pham and Renshaw (2015) noted that while there is a growing emphasis on teacher autonomy and reflective teaching, the extent of organizational support available to teachers remains under-explored.

*Professional Development through Reflective Teaching*

Reflective teaching is closely linked to teachers’ professional development. According to Larrivee (2000); Larrivee (2008) reflective practice enables teachers to critically analyze their teaching, leading to enhanced pedagogical skills and knowledge. In the EFL context, Borg (2011); Borg (2013) and Borg (2018) observed that reflective teaching practices contribute significantly to teachers’ linguistic and cultural sensitivity, which is crucial in multilingual and multicultural classrooms. Specifically, in Vietnam, Thao et al. (2023) highlighted that reflective teaching practices have the potential to bridge the gap between theoretical knowledge and practical teaching skills among EFL teachers.

*Challenges in Implementing Reflective Teaching*

Despite its recognized benefits, implementing reflective teaching practices comes with challenges. Mann and Walsh (2017) pointed out that time constraints, lack of training in reflective methods, and institutional pressures often hinder teachers’ engagement in reflective practices. Nguyen (2013) provided specific insights into the Vietnamese context, noting that traditional teaching norms and administrative workload can impede the adoption of reflective teaching practices.

While the existing literature provides valuable insights into reflective teaching practices and the need for organizational support, there remains a gap in understanding the specific nature and impact of such support in the Vietnamese tertiary EFL context. This study aims to fill this gap by exploring the perspectives of Vietnamese tertiary EFL teachers on the organizational supports necessary for reflective teaching and how these supports contribute to their professional development.

**Methods**

*Research Design*
This qualitative study employs semi-structured interviews to delve into the experiences and perceptions of Vietnamese tertiary EFL teachers regarding the organizational supports necessary for engaging in reflective teaching practices. The choice of a qualitative approach is grounded in its suitability for exploring the nuanced, context-specific experiences and subjective understandings of individuals within their natural settings. Semi-structured interviews provide a flexible yet focused means for gathering in-depth insights, allowing the researchers to probe into specific areas while also enabling participants to share their experiences and perspectives freely.

The theoretical framework underpinning this study is twofold, integrating the concepts of Reflective Practice Theory (RPT) and Organizational Support Theory (OST). RPT, primarily derived from Schön (1983); Schön (1987); Schön (2017) conceptualization, serves as the foundation for understanding reflective teaching. It posits that professionals, including teachers, engage in a continuous cycle of reflection, where they critically analyze their experiences, derive insights, and apply this understanding to improve their practice. This theory highlights the importance of reflection as a means for professional development, particularly in complex and dynamic educational settings like those encountered by EFL teachers.

OST, on the other hand, provides the lens through which the role of institutional factors in facilitating or hindering reflective practices is examined. Kurtessis et al. (2017) and Hutchison (1997) conceptualization of perceived organizational support emphasizes how employees’ perceptions of the extent to which their organization values their contributions and cares about their well-being can significantly impact their job performance and engagement. In the context of this study, this theory aids in understanding how various forms of organizational support (or lack thereof) influence EFL teachers’ engagement in reflective teaching practices.

By integrating these two theoretical frameworks, the study aims to explore not only how Vietnamese tertiary EFL teachers engage in reflective practices but also the organizational contexts that enable or impede these practices. The semi-structured interviews are designed to elicit detailed responses regarding teachers’ experiences with reflective teaching, their perceptions of organizational support, and the interplay between these elements. This approach provides a comprehensive understanding of the factors that contribute to the effective implementation of reflective teaching practices in the Vietnamese tertiary EFL context, thus offering valuable insights for educators, administrators, and policymakers.

Participants

The study’s participant group comprised nine Vietnamese EFL teachers, strategically selected from two different tertiary institutions in Vietnam to ensure a representation of diverse teaching contexts and experiences. This selection aimed to capture a broad spectrum of insights and perspectives on the organizational supports for reflective teaching practices. The participants were categorized into three distinct career stages to facilitate a comprehensive analysis across different professional phases: three novice teachers with less than five years of teaching experience, three mid-career teachers with five to fifteen years of experience, and three near-end career teachers with over fifteen years of experience. This stratification allowed for an exploration of how needs and perceptions regarding organizational support and reflective practices might evolve over a teacher’s career.

Ethical considerations were paramount throughout the research process. Prior to conducting the interviews, informed consent was obtained from all participants, ensuring they were fully aware of the study’s purpose, the nature of their involvement, and their right to withdraw at any time without penalty. Confidentiality and anonymity were strictly maintained. Participants were assured that their identities would be protected in all study reports and publications, with pseudonyms used in place of real names. The interviews were conducted in a respectful and non-intrusive manner, with sensitivity to the cultural and professional contexts of the participants. Additionally, care was taken to ensure that the questions posed did not lead to discomfort or stress for the participants. The study adhered to the ethical guidelines and standards set by the institutional review board overseeing the research, ensuring that the research was conducted with the highest ethical standards and respect for the participants’ rights and well-being.

Data Collection

Data collection in this study was primarily conducted through semi-structured interviews, which were meticulously designed to elicit in-depth responses from the participants regarding their experiences and
perceptions of organizational support for reflective teaching practices. Initially, a pilot study was conducted with two EFL teachers who were not part of the main study. The purpose of this pilot study was to test the effectiveness and clarity of the interview questions. Based on the feedback received and the researchers’ observations during the pilot, necessary revisions were made to the interview questions to ensure they were open-ended yet specific enough to guide the conversation effectively towards the research objectives.

The revised interview questions encompassed a range of topics, including participants’ experiences with reflective teaching practices, their perceptions of the availability and effectiveness of organizational support in their institutions, and the impact of such support on their professional development. Some of the key questions included: “Can you describe how you engage in reflective teaching practices?”, “In what ways does your institution support or hinder your reflective teaching?”, and “How do you believe organizational support impacts your professional growth as an EFL teacher?”

Each interview lasted approximately 60 to 90 minutes, providing ample time for participants to share their experiences and perspectives comprehensively. The interviews were conducted in settings that were convenient and comfortable for the participants, primarily in quiet, private spaces within their respective institutions or via online platforms when in-person meetings were not feasible. To ensure the comfort of the participants and the accuracy of the data, all interviews were conducted in Vietnamese, the participants’ native language. This choice was crucial for facilitating a deeper, more nuanced understanding of the participants’ perspectives and for ensuring that language barriers did not hinder the expression of their experiences and viewpoints.

The use of the participants’ native language necessitated subsequent translation and transcription of the interviews into English for analysis. This translation process was undertaken with utmost care to maintain the integrity and meaning of the participants’ responses. The transcriptions were then carefully reviewed and cross-checked to ensure accuracy and reliability before being used for data analysis. The careful consideration of language in the data collection process was essential for capturing the authentic voices and experiences of the Vietnamese EFL teachers, thereby enriching the study’s findings and conclusions.

Data Analysis

The data collected from the semi-structured interviews were subjected to a rigorous thematic analysis, a method well-suited for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns or themes within qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2012, 2023; Braun, Clarke, & Hayfield, 2023). This approach facilitated an in-depth exploration of the experiences and perceptions of Vietnamese tertiary EFL teachers regarding organizational supports for reflective teaching practices. The analysis process began with a meticulous transcription of the interviews, followed by a careful reading to gain a holistic understanding of the content.

Initially, the researchers engaged in open coding, meticulously reading through the transcripts to identify initial codes. This process involved noting significant or interesting points made by the participants, which were then tagged with a code summarizing the essence of that point. These initial codes were generated inductively, directly from the data, without trying to fit them into a pre-existing coding frame. The aim was to remain as close to the data as possible, ensuring that the analysis was grounded in the participants’ actual words and experiences. Following the initial coding phase, the researchers began to search for themes by collating all the codes and the relevant data extracts associated with them. This stage involved the recognition of patterns and the grouping of similar codes into potential themes. It was a recursive process, with the researchers going back and forth between the dataset, the coded extracts, and the developing themes, refining and modifying the themes as necessary. The next phase involved reviewing and refining the themes. Each theme was scrutinized to determine whether it formed a coherent pattern and whether the data within it coherently related to the theme. Themes were merged, subdivided, or discarded based on their relevance and coherence. This process ensured that the final themes were robust and well-supported by the data. Finally, the researchers defined and named the themes, developing detailed analyses of each theme and the overall story they told about the data. The analysis was not just a descriptive account but also involved interpreting various aspects of the research topic, such as how and why organizational supports influenced reflective teaching practices among the participants.

Throughout the data analysis process, the researchers maintained a reflexive stance, being mindful of their own biases and perspectives and how these could influence the analysis. The aim was to ensure that the
analysis remained grounded in the data and that the findings accurately reflected the participants’ experiences and perspectives. The thematic analysis thus provided a rich, detailed, and nuanced understanding of the organizational supports needed for effective reflective teaching practices in the context of Vietnamese tertiary EFL teachers.

**Findings**

**Organizational Supports for Effective Reflective Teaching Practices**

The thematic analysis of the semi-structured interviews revealed significant insights into the types of organizational supports perceived as necessary by Vietnamese tertiary EFL teachers to engage effectively in reflective teaching practices. A key finding that emerged was the need for structured professional development programs focused on reflective teaching methodologies. This finding was consistently highlighted across all participant groups, with 7 out of 9 participants emphasizing its importance. Specifically, all three novice teachers, two of the mid-career teachers, and two of the near-end career teachers mentioned this need.

One novice teacher expressed, “As a new teacher, I feel somewhat lost in how to reflect effectively on my teaching. Structured training programs or workshops on reflective practices would be immensely helpful.” A mid-career teacher shared, “Over the years, I have realized the importance of reflection in teaching, but often we are left to figure it out on our own. Formal training in this area would be beneficial.” Similarly, a near-end career teacher noted, “Even with years of experience, there is always something new to learn. I believe structured professional development in reflective teaching can bring fresh perspectives to our practice.”

RPT posits that reflective teaching is a skill that can be developed and enhanced through systematic approaches. The desire for structured professional development programs aligns with this theory, suggesting that teachers recognize the need for guided learning opportunities to develop their reflective skills effectively. This need is particularly pronounced among novice teachers, who may require more foundational support in embedding reflective practices into their teaching. OST provides further insight into these findings. The theory emphasizes that employees’ perception of organizational support, including professional development opportunities, significantly impacts their engagement and performance. The teachers’ call for structured professional development programs reflects a need for perceived organizational support in their professional journey. It suggests that when teachers feel supported by their institutions in their professional growth, particularly in areas as crucial as reflective teaching, they are more likely to engage actively and effectively in such practices.

**Contribution of Organizational Supports to Professional Development**

The analysis of the interviews revealed insightful findings regarding how organizational supports contribute to the professional development of Vietnamese tertiary EFL teachers. A predominant theme that emerged was the enhancement of pedagogical skills and teaching efficacy through reflective practices fostered by organizational supports. This theme was emphasized by a majority of the participants, with 8 out of 9 teachers highlighting its significance. Specifically, it was mentioned by all three novice teachers, three mid-career teachers, and two near-end career teachers.

A novice teacher stated, “Support from my institution in reflective teaching has directly impacted my classroom techniques. I feel more confident and equipped to handle diverse classroom situations.” A mid-career teacher reflected, “With the support I received, I have developed a deeper understanding of my teaching style and how to adapt it to different student needs.” Moreover, a near-end career teacher mentioned, “Reflective practices, supported by the institution, have kept my teaching methods dynamic and effective, even after years in this profession.”

RPT suggests that reflection is a key component of professional growth, enabling teachers to critically evaluate and enhance their teaching practices. The participants’ experiences indicate that organizational supports that facilitate reflective practices play a crucial role in developing their pedagogical skills and teaching efficacy. This is particularly vital for novice teachers who are in the early stages of forming their teaching identities and methodologies. OST offers an understanding of how perceived support from institutions can influence teachers’ engagement in professional development activities. The theory posits that when teachers feel supported by their organization, they are more likely to invest in their professional growth and adopt innovative practices. The teachers’ reflections indicate that organizational supports not
only enable them to engage in reflective practices but also foster a sense of confidence and motivation to continuously develop their teaching skills.

Discussion

The current study’s findings on the necessity of organizational supports for effective reflective teaching practices among Vietnamese tertiary EFL teachers provide significant contributions to the existing body of literature. While previous studies have acknowledged the importance of reflective teaching for professional development (Farrell, 2013, 2015; Richards & Lockhart, 1994) this study uniquely emphasizes the crucial role of structured professional development programs specifically focused on reflective teaching methodologies. This finding resonates with the assertions of RPT (Schön, 1983, 1987, 2017) but extends it by highlighting the specific needs within the Vietnamese EFL context.

The emphasis on structured professional development is a distinctive aspect of this study, contrasting with general findings in existing literature that often focus broadly on the need for professional development without specifying the structure or content (Borg, 2011, 2018). The call for specific training in reflective teaching methodologies, especially emphasized by novice teachers in this study, underscores a gap in current institutional supports. This need for structured guidance is not as prominently highlighted in earlier studies (Hung & Thuy, 2021; Nguyen, 2017; Tuan, 2021) marking a significant contribution of this research to understanding the specific developmental needs of EFL teachers at different career stages.

Similarly, the study’s findings on the contribution of organizational supports to the professional development of Vietnamese tertiary EFL teachers align with and expand upon existing literature. While the enhancement of pedagogical skills and teaching efficacy through reflective practices is acknowledged in the field (Kurosh, Yousefi, & Kashef, 2020; Larrivee, 2000, 2008; Motallebzadeh, Ahmadi, & Hosseinnia, 2018) this study uniquely demonstrates how these improvements are facilitated by specific types of organizational support within the Vietnamese context. The emphasis on organizational support, as viewed through the lens of OST (Hutchison, 1997; Kurtessis et al., 2017) adds depth to our understanding of the interplay between institutional environments and reflective practice.

This study also diverges from previous research by providing a nuanced understanding of how these supports are perceived and utilized by teachers at different stages of their careers. The insights from near-end career teachers about maintaining dynamic and effective teaching methods through institutional support contrast with the existing literature, which often focuses on the needs of novice or less experienced teachers (Mann & Walsh, 2017; Nguyen, 2013). This difference highlights the study’s contribution in addressing the professional development needs across a teacher’s career span.

Conclusion

This qualitative study set out to explore the organizational supports needed for effective reflective teaching practices among Vietnamese tertiary EFL teachers and how these supports contribute to their professional development. The research was conducted against the backdrop of the unique challenges and opportunities in the Vietnamese EFL context, where reflective teaching is increasingly recognized as a vital component of teacher professional development. Employing semi-structured interviews with nine Vietnamese EFL teachers across different career stages (novice, mid-career, and near-end career), the study delved deeply into their experiences and perceptions.

The findings of the study were illuminating. It was found that structured professional development programs specifically focused on reflective teaching methodologies were deemed crucial by the participants. This need was consistently voiced across all career stages, with a particular emphasis on its importance for novice teachers who require foundational support in embedding reflective practices into their teaching. Additionally, the study revealed that organizational supports significantly contribute to the enhancement of pedagogical skills and teaching efficacy, with teachers reporting a direct impact on their classroom techniques and confidence. These findings were interpreted through the lenses of RPT and OST, providing a nuanced understanding of the needs and dynamics at play in the professional development of EFL teachers.

The implications of this study are manifold. Firstly, it underscores the need for educational institutions, particularly in Vietnam, to invest in structured professional development programs that specifically address
reflective teaching practices. Such programs should be tailored to meet the needs of teachers at different stages of their careers, recognizing that the support required by novice teachers might differ from that needed by their more experienced counterparts. Secondly, the study highlights the broader role of organizational support in teacher development. Educational leaders and policymakers are encouraged to foster an institutional culture that values and supports reflective practices, recognizing its impact on teaching efficacy and professional growth. Finally, the findings suggest that investing in such supports can lead to more dynamic, effective teaching methods, benefiting not just the teachers but also the students they educate.

In conclusion, this study contributes to the growing body of literature on teacher professional development in EFL contexts, with a specific focus on the Vietnamese tertiary education sector. It offers practical insights for educational administrators and policymakers on how to better support teachers in their professional journeys, ultimately leading to enhanced educational outcomes in the complex and evolving landscape of EFL teaching.

Limitations and Recommendations for Further Studies

One of the primary limitations of this study lies in its scope, being confined to a relatively small sample of nine Vietnamese tertiary EFL teachers from only two institutions. While this provided in-depth insights, the findings may not be widely generalizable across different regions or educational contexts within Vietnam. Furthermore, the study’s reliance on semi-structured interviews, although rich in qualitative data, may not capture the complete range of factors influencing reflective teaching practices. The subjective nature of self-reported data also poses a limitation, as it may be influenced by participants’ personal biases or their interpretations of what the researchers might want to hear. Additionally, the study did not consider other stakeholders, such as students or administrators, whose perspectives could provide a more holistic understanding of the organizational supports for reflective teaching.

Future research could address these limitations by expanding the sample size and including a more diverse range of institutions, both geographically and in terms of their educational focus. This would enhance the generalizability of the findings. Additionally, incorporating a mixed-methods approach, combining qualitative data with quantitative measures, could provide a more comprehensive understanding of the impact of organizational supports on reflective teaching practices. Further studies might also explore the perspectives of other stakeholders, like students, school administrators, and policy-makers, to gain a multi-dimensional understanding of the dynamics at play. It would also be beneficial to conduct longitudinal studies to observe how the impact of organizational supports on reflective teaching practices and professional development evolves over time. These future studies could significantly contribute to the development of more effective strategies for promoting reflective teaching practices in various educational contexts, both within Vietnam and in similar EFL teaching environments globally.

References


