Professional development activities of English language lecturers in Vietnam through the lens of sociocultural theory

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Abstract

Sociocultural theory emphasizes that social interaction and interaction with cultural artifacts lead to development. Adopting these principles of sociocultural theory, the current study aims to investigate the implementation of professional development activities for 56 English language lecturers at a tertiary institution in Vietnam and how these activities mediated their teaching careers. All of the lecturers were invited to participate in a survey, and 20 of them were interviewed. The findings indicate that for professional development, the English language lecturers considered interaction through students' feedback or course evaluation the most common activity, followed by interaction with colleagues via workshops, seminars, and conferences at different levels. In addition, the lecturers used videos, webinars, websites, books, and databases to create resources for their teaching. The mediating roles of social interaction, self-regulation, and artifacts were found to impact teachers' cognitive aspects, including knowledge, teaching skills, research, and also their enhanced motivation to work. From the findings, recommendations are put forward for the availability of regular training activities, opportunities for teachers to socialize, and the abundance of cultural and digital resources as affordances for teachers' professional development.

Introduction

Professional development is part of any profession. In language teaching, professional development engages teachers in activities that lead to growth in their understanding and teaching skills. Professional development activities include those carried out at educational institutions or elsewhere, and they are generally grouped into activities such as learning, teaching, and researching done by individuals under the guidance of supervisors/mentors or in collaboration with others (Agbayahoun, 2016; Alshumaimeri & Almohaisen, 2017; Cirocki & Farrell, 2019). Examples of these activities include informal conversations with colleagues about teaching, English language teaching workshops, conferences, seminars, webinars, independent research, reading of professional materials, degree programmes, English language teaching training courses, and participating in class observations.

For professional development to take place, teachers are expected to participate in various activities to obtain knowledge and skills, which mediates their career growth. These activities must involve stakeholders, including school leaders and teachers, who must be informed of how to sustainably apply the knowledge and skills that they have obtained from the training courses (Agyei, 2022). Another recommended element for professional development includes developing teachers' bonding with colleagues within and outside their schools via social media platforms to build professional learning networks. The selection of learning networks can be based on their perceived weaknesses in content, pedagogy, or social-emotional attributes to improve their teaching skills (Mayeaux & Olivier, 2022).

This study adopts sociocultural theory proposed by Vygotsky (1978) and his colleagues as a theoretical framework to examine the mediation in the professional development of English language lecturers at a higher institution in Vietnam. According to sociocultural theory, human cognition is shaped and transformed through participating in social activities (Golombek & Doran, 2014). Mediation is the central concept of sociocultural theory, which refers to the developmental mechanism through which individuals, with time and interaction, via feedback and discussion with others, internalize knowledge and skills. Mediation in professional development can thus be realised and then internalized by individuals through observation and mentoring models given by others, such as teacher educators and more knowledgeable teachers. In other words, by engaging in professional development activities, teachers may go through a process whereby their understanding is refracted through the experience of others (Le, 2020), the use of cultural artifacts (e.g. learning resources) (Le & Bui, 2021), and self-regulation (Shi, 2017). Mediation can take place in most of daily and professional activities, but there remains a question of whether professional development activities can mediate language teachers in their institutional context. The overall focus of the current study is to explore the professional activities implemented by English language lecturers in Vietnam and to examine how mediation from doing these activities impacts their professional development. The findings of the current study thus can specify the mediation concept of sociocultural theory in teacher education and contribute to the application of the concept in future studies in interpreting how growth in teaching professions can be realized. The findings can also provide practical implications for English language lecturers to develop themselves in terms of knowledge and skills in English teaching and for doing research required for the positions of university lecturers.

Literature review and theoretical framework

Sociocultural theory

Sociocultural theory emphasizes the social and cultural context in which mediation takes place via interaction in the learning process. Thanks to mediation, humans develop their thinking and are assisted in performing the activities they may not be able to do alone. One key concept in sociocultural theory is the zone of proximal development, which Vygotsky (1978) defines 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). The zone of proximal development has been interpreted to refer to assistance of different kinds, from interaction to the use of tools and artifacts leading to development in individuals. In teacher education, the zone of proximal development indicates the assistance teachers receive via talks with colleagues and experts or through interacting with digital tools to develop knowledge and skills related to their fields.

According to sociocultural theory, for development to take place, there must be "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" (Ashton, 2021, p. 3) and "specific goal-oriented sociocultural activities" (Golombek & Doran, 2014, p. 104). In this study, these goal-oriented sociocultural activities are referred to as professional development activities in the teaching profession engaged by English language lecturers regarding learning, teaching, and researching. These activities can be carried out by themselves, under the guidance of more knowledgeable others (Le, 2007), or in collaboration with others.

Sociocultural theory and professional development

This study adopted sociocultural theory as the theoretical framework to analyze the activities carried out by English language lecturers at an institution in Vietnam. More specifically, the concept of mediation in sociocultural theory guided the study. Mediation in sociocultural theory perspectives can be object-regulated, other-regulated, and self-regulated (Shi, 2017). First, to be object-regulated, EFL teachers are mediated by cognitive tools, such as English resources and social media, which serve to construct knowledge, consciousness, and reflection, which are considered to lead to professional development in teaching practice. Second, with regard to being other-regulated, assistance from others via communication, supervision, and interaction with other teachers, especially experts and

more capable teachers, is necessary to create new zones of professional development. Finally, to be self-regulated, English as a foreign language teachers respond to their work environment, reflect on their teaching, and manifest themselves to gain cognitive control for development in their profession. Sociocultural theory may also help explain professional development through a process of internalizing the external factors (Tasker et al., 2010). In other words, development in sociocultural theory is seen as the appropriateness of ideas that assimilate with pre-existing knowledge to reconstruct one's understanding. Accordingly, "internalization and transformation are individual, based on participation in social activities, and gauged by how these social activities are manifested" (p. 130). In quite a similar vein, Burner and Svendsen (2020) suggest considering teachers' backgrounds, and their use of tools and strategies to obtain changes and development through social interaction. Van Huizen et al. (2005) further specify the relationship between professional learning and development as the teachers' engagement in social events. They state:

> Professional learning and development are best conceived and conditioned as an aspect of evolving participation in social practice. Participation involves being drawn into a setting that includes a program directed to the realization of values and goals, forms of social interaction and co-operation in an institutional context, and the use of cultural resources. (p. 274)

Seen from a sociocultural perspective, professional development takes place at certain times and in certain places with both constraints and affordances (White, 2018). In other words, viewing teacher professional development through the lens of sociocultural theory sheds light on how teachers develop their profession in their work settings as well as the activities that transform their understandings of the work of teachers and teaching practices (Tasker et al., 2010). Thus, sociocultural theory views teachers in the professional development process as taking an active role in creating their own knowledge and improvement (Khan et al., 2023). Besides, from the perspective of sociocultural theory, various means of mediation, such as tools and materials resources, signs, newsletters and journals, and other human activities, contribute to development in their profession.

Previous studies on using sociocultural theory as a framework to interpret professional development

Studies on professional development from a sociocultural perspective have dwelled on the tenets of interaction, assistance, and how professional development is realized. For example, Kasi (2010) argued that the traditional model of knowledge transmission tends not to be beneficial to the professional development of EFL teachers. The author adopted sociocultural theory, specifically the concept of community of practice and collaborative action research, as an alternative model to actively involve novice teachers, experienced teachers, teacher-educators, and university researchers to pursue vibrant professional development in the field. The empirical studies on applying the new model to the present situation of teaching and learning English were found to meet the need for change in the professional development of EFL in Pakistan.

Also inspired by the concept of community practice in sociocultural theory, Chen and Cheng (2014) explored teachers' professional growth in team teaching and the larger teaching context. Both Taiwanese and foreign English teachers paired the participants in their first year of teaching at the primary level in Taiwan. The findings of the study indicated favor for the situated and social nature of teacher learning. However, the socialization of the participants did not follow the typical learning process in a community of practice in which newcomers become more experienced members of a community.

Another professional development theme viewed through the lens of sociocultural theory is teacher agency development. In this direction, Kayi-Aydar (2019) investigated how a Hispanic language teacher invested in the agency while developing professional identities in different contexts. This case study adopted a narrative method with a recursive analysis of interviews and journal entries. The results showed three factors contributing to shaping the participants' agency and professional identity development - English language learning experience, discrimination and marginalization in the work environments, and knowledge gained through graduate studies. The author argued that the roles of ethnic and racial background, experience, and power differentials had links with the dynamic nature of teacher agency and identities.

In the same vein of exploring the concept of teacher agency in professional development, Uştuk and De Costa (2021) examined teachers' reflections on a lesson study model as a form of scaffolding. Field notes, interviews, and audio diaries were used to collect both introspective and retrospective data on reflective action both as a process and as a product. The findings indicated that reflective practice permeates lesson study as teachers reflect on their practice both individually and collaboratively. The study confirmed that teacher agency can be promoted in reflective practice throughout lesson study, and reflection might support transformative teacher agency among EFL teachers.

In a review of many professional development studies, especially those on teachers' online professional development between 2015 and 2019, Dille and Røkenes (2021) concluded that teachers' internal factors were crucial in their interactions with facilitators and peers. Among the factors, scaffolding was the most dominant category, with the main components as the teachers, their context, and online programs facilitating a shared understanding.

Uştuk and De Costa (2021) explored the nature of reflective practice in a professional development process among EFL teachers at a university in Turkey. Field notes, interviews, and audio diaries were used to collect both introspective and retrospective data. The findings showed that mediated by the lesson study model, the participants engaged in dialogic and collaborative teaching practice as a part of a professional development endeavor. They reinforced their teaching agency from the very beginning by choosing what

to work on and philosophy throughout the transformative process by developing new understanding and reframing their teaching practice.

Mediation also took the form of shared talks among teachers, as revealed in the studies by Zoshak (2016) and Shabani et al. (2010). For example, Zoshak (2016) explored "tiny talks" between teachers and colleagues about how they felt or what they struggled with could address an essential but often "extracurricular" aspect of teacher education. The findings revealed that "tiny talks" functioned as a mediational tool in transforming a change and facilitating progress in both being and becoming a teacher. Interactions in "tiny talks" fostered the casual nature of the interactions but implied possible applications to teacher education and professional development. Shabani et al. (2010) used Vygotsky's zone of proximal development to explore instructional implications in teachers' professional development. The study found that diary writing, peer and mentor collaboration, action research, practicum, and English language teaching discourse served as scaffolders to affect the progression of Zone of Proximal Development in language teachers. In another study, Eun (2008) found that professional development was a collaborative network that brought teachers together and a forum for teachers to share their intellectual challenges and resolutions, emotional struggles, and coping strategies. The study by Kuusisaari (2014) used the concept of the zone of proximal development to interpret the kinds of activities that support or hinder collaborative teacher learning during an in-service education course. The author pointed out that ideation, further development of ideas, and raising of questions led to collaborative development in teachers. However, excessive agreement appeared to prevent successful collaborative development.

Overall, the review of the related previous studies indicates that sociocultural theory can shed light on understanding mediation of English language teachers' professional development. However, there are questions related to what specific forms of mediation take place when English language lecturers conduct professional development activities. Besides, it is worth focussing on one specific context, which is tertiary education in Vietnam, to explore what professional development activities are implemented by the English language lecturers at these institutions and how these activities impact or make changes to their careers. It is necessary to investigate these activities to provide insight into language teacher education and to promote professional development among the English language lecturers in Vietnam and in other contexts where the practice of professional development is similar. On these grounds, the current study was set out to answer for the following research questions:

(1) What professional development activities are implemented by English language lecturers in Vietnam?

(2) How do these activities mediate English language lecturers' professional development?

Methodology

Research design

This study adopted a descriptive research design combining both qualitative and quantitative approaches. To be more specific, a questionnaire and an interview protocol were used to obtain data for the study. A 35-item questionnaire was designed, based on the perspectives of mediation from sociocultural theory. It consists of six clusters including (1) professional development activities implemented by English language lecturers via social interaction, (2) professional development activities implemented by English language lecturers via object-regulation, (3) professional development activities implemented by English language lecturers via self-regulation, (4) impact of professional development activities on English language lecturers via social interaction, (5) impact of professional development activities on English language lecturers via object-regulation, and (6) impact of professional development activities on English language lecturers via self-regulation were designed with the five-Likert scale collect data.

Besides, an interview protocol was designed with questions about the activities that lecturers had conducted themselves and with other colleagues/lecturers for professional development and their opinions about these activities, the resources they used, and the impact of these resources on their professional development.

Research setting

The study was conducted at a university in Vietnam that trains English language teachers from primary to tertiary levels in the country. The lecturers in charge of teaching English at the institution received their master's and Ph.D. degrees in teaching English to speakers of other languages or applied linguistics in Vietnam and other English-speaking countries. They have at least five years of experience in training English teachers in Vietnam. The participants in the current study were informed of the study's purpose and consented to join the study.

Sample and data collection

This study adopted convenient sampling to recruit voluntary participants. An invitation was sent to a tertiary institution in Vietnam via email and group contacts on social media, and a total of 56 English lecturers in Vietnam consented to take part in the study. For data collection, first, the participants completed a questionnaire and later, 20 volunteer lecturers of this population were chosen using the convenient sampling principle to take part in semi-structured interviews. All of the interviewees were anonymized in the data report and were referred to as T1-T20. It took about 10 minutes to complete a questionnaire and 20 minutes for each interview. The interview was semi-structured, with the questions prepared in advance, based on the mediation of sociocultural theory in relation to professional development. In the interviews, the researcher first explained the purpose of the study and then asked the participants to answer the questions in English

or Vietnamese. During the interviews, if further information was needed to clarify the lecturers' answers, then some probing questions such as "Please explain further" or "Please provide an explanation for your answer" were posed. On average, each interview lasted about 20 minutes, and the participants were put at ease to talk about their experiences implementing their professional development activities. The interview questions were to prompt the participants to recall their experiences and perceptions, and they were comfortable sharing since there were no controversial and ethical matters in the interviews.

Data analysis

The qualitative and quantitative data were analyzed separately. The quantitative data collected from the questionnaire were first projected into the statistical package for the social sciences for statistical values, including the mean score and standard deviation of every single item before each factor's scale reliability (Cronbach's alpha) was examined. For data collected from the interviews, an inductive content-based process was employed to look for frequent, dominant, and significant themes emerging during the analysis (Mackey & Gass, 2005). The interview transcript coding was adapted from Tavil and Güngör (2017) and Shi (2017), given that the data from the interviews can highlight the themes related to sociocultural mediators and explain the growth through interactions with oneself, others, and objects. For example, the self-regulation themes had coded sub-themes as reading, attending conferences, and taking part in training courses; other-regulated themes included co-researching and co-teaching, and object-regulation themes included using artifacts for professional development.

Findings

The questionnaire data was tabulated to see the result. The questionnaire's internal coefficient consistency (Cronbach's alpha) was 0.919, indicating its high reliability. First, the analysis of the questionnaire data for professional development activities implemented by English language lecturers via social interaction was processed (see Table 1).

In general, the activity achieving the highest mean score was the asking for students' feedback/course evaluation for professional development (M=3.8393, SD=0.86921), indicating that the participants' relatively high agreement with their reflections on their course evaluation at the end of their courses but their responses dispersed significantly on the five-level scale from the choice of rarely to always. This result could be explained by the fact that teachers were concerned about their students' opinions and course evaluations at the end of each semester to improve their teaching. It could also be explained that course evaluation is required at the research site. In comparison, the statement with the lowest mean score was "I collaborate with other English language lecturers to do research related to English language teaching for my professional development" (M = 3.3214, SD = 0.97435). Other statements about collaborating to design/prepare materials and lessons with colleagues

Table 1. Professional development activities implemented by English language lecturers via social interaction.

Statement	Min	Max	Mean	SD
1. I interact with other colleagues via workshops, colloquia, seminars, mentoring, etc. on topics related to English language teaching for my professional development.	2.00	5.00	3.7679	0.66033
2. I interact with other experts via workshops, colloquia, seminars, mentoring, etc. on topics related to English language teaching for my professional development.	2.00	5.00	3.5179	0.83101
3. I seek assistance from other English language lecturers through communication and cooperation with them for my professional development.	3.00	5.00	3.7321	0.70042
4. I seek supervision from experts or seniors capable English language lecturers for my professional development.	2.00	5.00	3.4107	0.75743
5. I join online discussion groups (Zalo, Facebook, forum, etc.) with other lecturers with the same interests for my professional development.	1.00	5.00	3.4643	1.09485
6. I collaborate to design/prepare materials and lessons with colleagues for my English teaching.	1.00	5.00	3.5000	0.93420
7. I ask for students' feedback/course evaluation for my professional development.	1.00	5.00	3.8393	0.86921
8. I collaborate with other English language lecturers to do research related to English language teaching for my professional development.	1.00	5.00	3.3214	0.97435

for English teaching had similar mean scores above 3.0, indicating the respondents' relatively high agreement with these professional development activities.

Besides, 19 out of 20 teachers interviewed stated that they took part in workshops, seminars, and conferences at different levels as professional development activities, indicating that the respondents' preferences for implementing these professional development activities or these activities were useful for them. For instance, T10 and T12 reported:

> "I joined the short-term training courses to meet the immediate needs in my teaching job. Despite their short time, they are useful and help me to solve some problems in my teaching. I particularly appreciated the applicability and practicality of the course on how to teach phonics and pronunciation" (T 10).

> "I could observe, listen to, and interact with the senior lecturers and other lecturers in workshops and seminars. I could also discuss this with other teachers to obtain more information related to teaching. More importantly, I could develop my teaching competence in the fields that I am concerned" (T 12).

Furthermore, co-researching with other colleagues was reported to be another activity carried out by the participants (eight teachers) and meeting other colleagues (six teachers). The implementation of these activities suggests that the teachers perceived the benefits of interacting and socializing in their professional domain. While teaching was mediated by interaction with mainly students and exchanging experiences with colleagues, researching was seen to be mediated by interaction with colleagues only. For example, one teacher said,

"I would like to share with colleagues more about the ideas and the research findings. We also talk about teaching methods, materials for teaching and researching, and how to deal with disturbing students in the classes. With young teachers who used to be my students, I also talk to them to learn from them new ideas in teaching and to give them advice" (T 1).

Teacher 1's response indicates that she understood the benefits of social interaction for her own teaching purposes and to support the younger ones in their professional activities.

In general, the professional development activities described by the participants were varied, profession-related, and carried out on a daily basis. They encompass interaction through different channels with students in the classroom, with colleagues in the institutional context, and with others in both online and offline, social and academic circles.

Regarding professional development activities via cultural tools, below is the finding for the professional development activities that the participants in the current study reported to be mediated by objects or artifacts.

Table 2. Professional development activities implemented by English language lecturers: Object-regulation.

Statement	Min	Max	Mean	SD
9. I use material resources/ databases provided by my university for my professional development.	2.00	5.00	3.9107	0.83724
10. I read professional materials, e.g. English language teaching magazines, journals, books or research findings in the field for my professional development.	3.00	5.00	3.8036	0.69856
11. I register for/pay for the applications (e.g ELSA, Mindmeister, Kahoot, TED, etc.) for my professional development.	1.00	5.00	3.0000	1.06173
12. I use videos, webinars, websites, books and databases to obtain information for my English teaching.	2.00	5.00	4.2679	0.79752
13. I take teaching aids and other physical equipment as tools to transform external professional development knowledge into my own English teaching.	1.00	5.00	3.7500	0.89949

The use of the videos, webinars, websites, books and databases to have information to teach English achieved the highest agreement among the respondents (M=4.2679, SD= 0.79752). On the contrary, the statement, "I register for/pay for the applications (e.g. ELSA, Mindmeister, Kahoot, and TED) for my professional development." received the lowest mean score (M=3.000), showing that the teachers tended to use the available resources and those material resources/ databases provided by their university for their professional development (M =3.9107).

Besides, all the interviewed teachers said they used various resources and materials to mediate their teaching work. Those materials included both online and offline resources. For instance, T15 and T1 stated:

"I used Google Scholar and Google Book to find related materials and Sci-Hub to download documents." (T 15)

"The materials that I use include the online, man-made and artificial intelligence sources. The resources consist of the comments from my supervisors, colleagues' comments, and facial expressions. When I reflect on these input resources, I am able to internalize them to make them my own to serve my professional development". (T 1)

The training workshops were also considered to be the activities for professional development. Ten teachers confirmed the importance of joining the workshops as venues for obtaining knowledge and updating themselves with new teaching methods or information about using resources in teaching. For instance, one teacher said, "The training workshops provided me with knowledge and assessing tools to evaluate my students" (T 2). The other four teachers stated that the groups of similar professional concerns brought them ideas and resources for their career development.

Table 3. Professional development activities implemented by English language lecturers: Self-regulation.

Statement	Min	Max	Mean	SD
14. I reflect on my classroom teaching via narratives/teaching journals to strengthen my successes in teaching and to avoid the mistakes that I made before.	1.00	5.00	3.3036	1.00760
15. I self study topics related to my English teaching courses.	1.00	5.00	3.7679	0.97218
16. I visit other schools for professional development purposes.	1.00	5.00	2.6429	1.18212
17. I participate in training/research programs in other countries to enhance my professional development if given the opportunity.	1.00	5.00	3.1786	1.04633

Regarding the factors related to self-regulation for professional development, the quantitative data showed that the teachers expressed their high agreement with self-regulation (M=3.7679, SD=0.97218). However, their responses spread out in the five scales from strong disagreement to strong agreement. The statement "I visit other schools for professional development purposes." had the lowest mean value, at 2.6429. Other statements were in the range of 3.6 to 3.7.

In the interviews, most of the participants answered that they conducted self-regulation by reflection (10 teachers), doing action research (4 teachers), doing research (3 teachers), self-assessment (1 teacher), and reading research works related to their career specialization (2 teachers). Some teachers said:

"I observed my own teaching to know my strength." (T 2)

"Reflection is a cognitive activity. I do not write reflections but think about my teaching as a mental exercise and I am keen on doing such kind of reflections." (T3)

"I think about what I have taught and how to apply teaching methods more effectively. This has helped me improve my teaching everyday." (T 5)

The teachers' answers in the interviews indicate their high level of self-awareness of their professional development through the process of internalization using reflections because it is the procedure for them to adjust their teaching and improve themselves.

Impact of mediated professional development activities on English language lecturers

Data about the impact of social interaction on their professional development collected from the survey with 56 English language lecturers is presented in Table 4 below:

Table 4. Impact of professional development activities on English language lecturers: Social interaction.

Statement	Min	Max	Mean	SD
18. Interacting with other colleagues via workshops, seminars, mentoring, etc. on topics related to English language teaching brings me knowledge and experience for my teaching career.	2.00	5.00	4.1786	0.54296
19. Interacting with other experts via workshops, seminars, mentoring, etc. on topics related to English language teaching makes me feel more confident in my teaching.	2.00	5.00	4.0179	0.70042
20. Seeking assistance from other English language lecturers is a way for me to be scaffolded to do things related to my career that I am not ready to do without their help.	2.00	5.00	4.0000	0.63246
21. Seeking supervision from experts or senior/more capable English language lecturers can support me to move to new levels of development in my career.	3.00	5.00	4.1250	0.63425
22. Joining online discussion groups (Zalo, Facebook, forums, etc.) with other lecturers of the same interests, I can broaden my knowledge related to my job.	2.00	5.00	3.7679	0.76256
23. Co-working with colleagues to prepare materials and lessons, we can mediate one another to design good lessons.	2.00	5.00	4.0714	0.62834
24. During the course and at the end of the course, I ask for students' feedback/course evaluation to adjust my teaching.	2.00	5.00	3.9286	0.80582
25. Collaborating with other English language lecturers to do research related to English language teaching brings me knowledge and skills in research that I cannot have if I work alone.	2.00	5.00	4.0357	0.76192

Generally, the statements in the table above achieved high mean values ranging from 3.7 to 4.17. The highest mean value was for the statement, "Interacting with other experts via workshops, seminars, mentoring, etc. on topics related to English language teaching makes me feel more confident in my teaching." which achieved a mean score of 4.1786 with a rather low standard deviation, indicating the high consistency of the teachers' responses (SD = 0.54296). However, the teachers agreed at the lower rate with the statement "Joining online discussion groups (Zalo, Facebook, forums, etc.) with other lecturers of the same interests, I can broaden my knowledge related to my job." (M = 3.7679). With regard to the impact of self-regulation on professional development, the data is presented in Table 5.

All the participants seemed aware of the importance of life-long learning when teaching English. The statement "I practise life-long learning to keep myself updated in English language teaching." reached the highest mean value of

Table 5. Impact of professional development activities on English language lecturers: Self-regulation.

Statement	Min	Max	Mean	SD
26. Reflecting on my classroom teaching actively improves my teaching skills.	2.00	5.00	3.9643	0.76192
27. By self-studying the topics related to my teaching courses, I am able to update my teaching knowledge and up-grading my teaching skills.	3.00	5.00	4.1964	0.51943
28. When writing teaching journals, I reflect on the strengths and weaknesses of teaching and have solutions to improve my teaching.	2.00	5.00	3.8036	0.77271
29. Visiting other schools for observing and teaching purposes is a way for me to learn from the others and to improve my teaching.	1.00	5.00	3.5357	0.83043
30. I purposefully join training/research programs in other countries to have opportunities to gain knowledge and skills that contribute to my professional development.	2.00	5.00	3.8929	0.70527
31. I practise life-long learning to keep myself updated in English language teaching.	3.00	5.00	4.3750	0.52440

4.3750 and a low SD of 0.52440, indicating the concentration toward the mean value in the teachers' responses. However, the statement "Visiting other schools for observing and teaching purposes is a way for me to learn from the others and to improve my teaching." generated a rather low mean score of 3.5357. Besides, the impact of "By self-studying the topics related to my teaching courses, I am able to update my teaching knowledge and up-grading my teaching skills." also achieved a high mean score of 4.1964.

Table 6. Impact of professional development activities on English language lecturers: Object-regulation.

Statement	Min	Max	Mean	SD
32. I gain knowledge for my teaching when using material resources/ databases provided by my university.	2.00	5.00	3.8571	0.67227
33. Reading professional materials, e.g. English language teaching magazines, journals, books, or research findings in the field makes me think more about the solutions for my teaching.	2.00	5.00	3.8929	0.80178
34. Thanks to digital tools, such as the internet, smartphones, and applications, I have made my teaching more effective.	3.00	5.00	4.4821	0.57179
35. The use of videos, webinars, websites, books and databases facilitates obtaining and transforming knowledge and skills for my professional development.	2.00	5.00	4.4464	0.71146

The teachers appreciated the usefulness of digital tools, for example, the internet, smart phones, and online applications to teach more effectively (M = 4.4821) as well as using videos, webinars, websites, books, and databases to facilitate the obtaining and transforming of knowledge and skills for my professional development (M = 4.4464). Other statements on the theme also obtained a relatively high mean value of 3.8, indicating the teachers' relatively high agreement with the use of tools and applications for professional development. Overall, the mean scores from 3.8 to 4.4 in Table 6 indicate the English language lecturers' understanding of the mediation regulated by the use of tools and artifacts for their professional development.

Impact on teaching skills

In the interviews, half of the teachers described the impact of professional development on their professional knowledge. For example, one teacher said, "The reflections can help me to adjust my teaching, which is not logical, and realize students' needs." (T 4), and another stated, "Reflections bring me joy

and more ideas for teaching." (T 18). One teacher answered in the interview, "I self-assessed my teaching strategies and the knowledge to be more confident in my teaching job as well as professional development." (T 19). One teacher said that she wrote the teaching journal because "writing the teaching journal helped me to reflect more carefully and adjust my teaching activities. The internalization of the reflections makes me have critical thinking to teach more systematically." (T 16). The participants' answers indicate how they internalized the observation of their own teaching and made necessary changes to their teaching practice.

Impact on knowledge of teaching English

The majority of the teachers answered in the interviews that participating in the training workshops or conferences brought them knowledge in their specialization, "I have obtained necessary knowledge and skills from the expertise of my colleagues and experts for my teaching career" (T 11). Another teacher stated,

> "The professional development activities that I have done help me to reinforce my knowledge in certain fields, learn new ideas from colleagues, discuss some professional problems, and challenge my belief in implementing my professional development activities." (T 13)

One teacher regarded interaction with other colleagues as one way to update professional knowledge, "Thanks to talking to other teachers, exchanging important information related to our profession, I have been able to improve my professional development" (T 19). Another teacher said that she gained more knowledge about her teaching from online materials: "I usually read materials on websites such as Edutopia, TeachThought, BookWidgets blog, Facebook community, v.v. These websites enlarge my understanding, share and receive teaching tips effectively." Besides, professional knowledge is obtained not only from assistance and exchange with other colleagues but also from helping other teachers because "Assisting colleagues and students to gain knowledge and skills meaningfully is a way to improve my teaching skills" (T 20). The lecturers' responses indicate the various venues they used for knowledge related to their teaching jobs. Among them, interaction with colleagues for professional development tended to be carried out more often than referring to online or offline resources.

Impact on research work

In the interviews, eight teachers said that doing independent research or co-researching with other lecturers promoted their professionalism. One form of research that was mentioned by four interviewed teachers was action research. To be more specific, one lecturer said, "Action research helps me gain research competence to improve students' learning in my classes." (T 19). Other forms of research were also reported to mediate the lecturers. "What I have done with my colleagues promotes my research skills and enlarges knowledge in the field that I have not known before." (T 03). Another lecturer also said, "I have collaborated with other

colleagues to develop research topics and teaching, which was useful for my lectures with graduate students. Research perspectives from Vietnam and other countries serve as useful input for my research and teaching work" (T 18). The participants' answers reflect the requirements of doing research at the research site and that they were aware of this activity as part of professional development. They also indicated the importance of collaborating with colleagues for research work.

Impact on working motivation

Implementing professional development activities, for example, designing lesson plans and materials was reported to give the teachers motivation and content in their job. "I feel contented with my teaching innovative ideas." (T 15). The joy of teaching also came from sharing with other colleagues, "I received lots of advice and encouragement from other lecturers because they understand the difficulties that I encountered. Thanks to their encouragement, I was motivated to overcome the challenges and tried harder in my teaching career." (T 14). According to another teacher, her motivation in work was from the internalization of the knowledge from other teachers and "other colleagues not only inspire me but also help me to find the right solutions for my teaching problems. Thanks to their support, I have become more creative and loved my career more." (T 16).

In general, the responses from the English language lecturers indicate that they were mediated by social interaction with colleagues and other individuals from conferences and online forums and by interaction with tools and artifacts for knowledge and skills related to their teaching jobs. The impact of mediation was reported to benefit their teaching knowledge, skills, and motivation.

Discussion

The current study aimed to document the professional development activities practiced by English lecturers at a tertiary institution in Vietnam and to explore how these activities impacted their professional development. It adopted sociocultural principles of mediation via social interaction and cultural artifacts to design the contents of the data collection tools, including a questionnaire and an interview protocol. Mediation in the current study explains how individuals internalize knowledge and skills from social interaction with more knowledgeable others or through the use of tools (e.g. digital tools, teaching resources) and develop their skills and understanding (Burner & Svendsen, 2020; Cirocki & Farrell, 2019; Eun, 2008). Seen from the sociocultural theory lens, the professional development activities reported in this study encompassed social interaction in the way that the teachers interacted with students via teaching and course feedback to improve their teaching and share professional knowledge with colleagues. It could be due to the institutional and contextual contexts of the current study, which required the teachers to provide regular teaching feedback that manifested the practice, leading to changes in the teaching practice and professional development. Besides, in the current study, the mediating

role of more experienced and skilled colleagues and experts was found to obtain high agreement among the participants, which confirms the importance of the critical concept of scaffolding in sociocultural theory (Sadeghi & Navaie, 2021; Vygotsky, 1978). Interaction with other colleagues and experts at workshops, conferences, and training courses was reported to mediate the professional development of the English lecturers in the current study.

Sociocultural theory also emphasizes the mediating role of cultural activities and artifacts (Le, 2020; Le & Bui, 2021). In this study, online materials and digital tools were found to mediate the thinking process, forming new ideas, knowledge, and skills related to the teachers' teaching. The teachers in the current study had the highest agreement on the use of videos, webinars, websites, books, and databases to gain knowledge for their teaching (M = 4.2679). They also considered life-long learning important for professional development (M = 4.3750). They indicated that they self-direct to gain an understanding of the topics related to their courses and enhanced teaching skills (M = 4.1964) or did reflections on their professional development activities (M = 3.9643).

Regarding the impacts of doing professional development activities, the current study found three emerging themes: impact on teaching skills and knowledge, which resonates with the findings of the studies by Agbayahoun (2016), Alshumaimeri and Almohaisen (2017), and Cirocki and Farrell (2019). Besides, social interaction was reported by the participants to help them gain knowledge related to their teaching, which reiterates the findings of the study by Li (2021). However, the current study documented data indicating the mediating roles of doing research in the affective domain, which has not been discussed. The teachers reported in the interviews that they obtained work motivation when interacting with colleagues. The teachers also stated that the assistance from online communities gave them motivation and sharing as a community of practice, as in the study by del Rosal et al. (2016). In other words, a more comprehensive understanding of the role of mediation via professional development activities was uncovered in the current study, shedding light on the roles of interaction for both cognitive and affective impact, using artifacts and participating in a community of practice related to the English teaching profession.

Central to the sociocultural theory is the concept of mediation which indicates the internalization of external factors including scaffolding from more knowledgeable others (Tasker et al., 2010) and the use of tools such as digital resources and databases (Le & Bui, 2021; Shi, 2017). This study specified this mediation process of sociocultural theory. It found that mediation was seen to lead to changes in teaching skills, knowledge of teaching English and doing research work for the professional development of the English language lecturers. For teaching skills, the teachers in the current study highly agreed with assistance from other English lecturers as a way to be scaffolded to do things related to their career that they were not ready to do without help. The participants also reported gaining knowledge from joining online discussion groups related to their teaching jobs and from interaction with other

lecturers of the same interests to broaden their knowledge of their careers. Moreover, using online materials and other resources assisted them with knowledge for teaching and researching, which is a requirement for university lecturers in Vietnam. In general, the mediation process tends to refer to the engagement of the English lecturers in various directions, including interaction with others, with materials, and with themselves.

Conclusions and recommendations

In conclusion, from the findings of the current study on the mediating roles of social interaction, cultural activities, and artifacts in the professional development of English language lecturers, it is argued that the professional development of language teachers might necessarily be seen in connection with their colleagues, their students, and the affordances made available by the institutions and online communities. All these factors impact English language lecturers in terms of their teaching, research, and working motivation, to varying extent.

Sociocultural theory puts more emphasis on the mediating roles of social interaction and the use of tools, which leads to the development of thinking and teaching practice. This study's findings suggest that the mediating roles expand more than just the cognitive domain. Through interaction with colleagues, the teachers in the current study obtained their work motivation from sharing and encouragement, which is an indispensable factor in the teaching career. In other words, the current study contributes to the literature of sociocultural theory in terms of expanding the concept of mediation, which may lead to changes in teachers' affective factors related to their teaching careers. In this sense, professional development is more than just teaching, working, and researching. It is a more holistic picture of individual teachers in their work and their emotions.

From the findings of the current study, it is confirmed that the participant teachers appreciated professional development activities in any form and via any channel. Therefore, it is recommended that tertiary institutions provide teachers with opportunities to take part in these activities. Besides, interaction with colleagues in conferences or training workshops is considered to bring about enhanced knowledge and skills; thus, it might be essential that English teachers implement these professional development activities regularly. The emphasis on social interaction does not mean that autonomy, life-long, and self-study of teachers are not prioritized. Besides interaction with colleagues, English lecturers are recommended to learn more about and carry out self-mediated professional development activities, such as reflection. Reflections assist teachers to internalize teaching knowledge and skills. Furthermore, to realize the mediating roles of artifacts and digital tools, tertiary institutions might provide rich online and offline resources so that teachers can use them for professional development activities. In general, mediation via social interaction, self-mediation, or artifacts is meaningful and may contribute to transforming knowledge, understanding, and skills in teachers of English. Therefore, teachers and institutions can regularly implement professional development activities via

these platforms.

The current study was conducted at only one institution; therefore, the findings do not represent the professional development activities implemented in other educational contexts. Besides, the impacts of mediation via social interaction, self-regulation, and artifacts were explored by obtaining data from teachers' reflections and interviews. They were not measured statistically. Future studies can collect data quantitatively to document the quantified professional development of teachers.

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