

MAINTAINING ENGLISH LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY: THE CASE OF HIGH SCHOOL EFL TEACHERS IN THE CENTRAL HIGHLAND OF VIETNAM

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Abstract: This study investigates strategies implemented by high school EFL teachers in the Central Highland of Vietnam to maintain the achieved level of English language proficiency. Factors inhibiting high school EFL teachers' language proficiency maintenance were also explored. One hundred and fifty teachers, having participated in the English language proficiency training workshop(s) by authorized institutions and achieved the CEFR-C1 level, participated in the study. The study employed a mixed-methods approach with a concurrent research design. Data were collected and analyzed through questionnaires, reflective reports, and interviews. Overall, findings have shown that while there were factors affecting their language proficiency maintenance, the teachers made efforts to handle those factors and implement different strategies to maintain the achieved level of proficiency. The present study has offered considerable insights to stakeholders, policymakers, and prospective EFL teachers working in Vietnam. Also, pedagogical implications have been made so as to increase the sustainability of language proficiency for EFL teachers in similar contexts.

Keywords: EFL teachers, language proficiency maintenance, professional development, Vietnam

1. Introduction

English language proficiency training in developing language teachers' foreign language competence has been emphasized in Vietnam since the implementation of the National Foreign Language Project 2020 (Project 2020) of Vietnamese Ministry of Education and Training (MOET) (Government, 2008). High school EFL teachers are expected to achieve an advanced level in the six-level Framework for Foreign Language Proficiency of Vietnam, equivalent to the level of C1 in the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) (MOET, 2014). Many training workshops have specially been designed for high school EFL teachers to develop and achieve at least one higher level of proficiency (LVP) after the training. Training workshops have taken place in Gia Lai and Kon Tum provinces since the academic year 2016-2017 by authorized universities. The training workshops consisted of both online and onsite training modes, which suggested about 400 guided learning hours to advance from one level of proficiency to the next. Project 2020 has a substantial influence on the EFL teachers in the Central Highland of Vietnam. Thanks to it, most of the EFL teachers in Gia Lai and Kon Tum provinces were assessed and trained in English language proficiency programs for the target of achieving C1 level in CEFR. According to the statistics in the annual reports in 2017 by the Departments of Education and Training (DOETs, 2016) in Gia Lai and Kon Tum, the number of high school

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language teachers in Gia Lai and Kon Tum who had participated in the training workshops held by the DOETs were about 146 out of 198 (74%) and 63 out of 80 (79%), respectively.

After having achieved the CEFR C1 level, in-service EFL teachers were selected by the DOETs to participate in short-term language proficiency improvement workshops held annually by authorized universities as part of their professional development. Those workshops emphasized teacher professional development, in which language teachers were trained in skills such as teaching techniques, curriculum development, and assessment. In addition, teacher trainees had opportunities to access teaching materials and to network with colleagues, which might affect their teaching practices.

While Project 2020 aims to organize many training workshops to deal with teachers' English language proficiency and professional development, there has been a limited number of research exploring high school EFL teachers' language proficiency maintenance (LPM). Furthermore, most language teachers seem not to have the need to improve their proficiency once they have taken tests and been certified as having achieved the CEFR C1 level administered by MOET (MOET, 2017). More importantly, the geographical traits and rural working conditions might deprive them of opportunities for co-constructing knowledge and skills. Language teachers in the Central Highland of Vietnam do not have many opportunities to communicate with native speakers and do not usually use much English in their teaching practices due to students' low and homogeneous level of language proficiency within one classroom. The limited provision of technological support and teachers' humble level of digital literacy may hinder their language proficiency improvement and maintenance. Last but not least, family issues, job commitments, and low incomes may make it challenging for them to invest more time in their language proficiency improvement and maintenance. Therefore, by employing a mixed-methods approach, this research investigates the strategies that high school EFL teachers in mountainous areas implemented to maintain the achieved LVP and factors affecting their LPM.

2. Literature review

2.1. Key terms

Professional development and teacher professional development

In the field of education, the term *professional development* (PD) has been defined in many ways. The term PD implies a long training process, involves theory as a background to practice, and suggests a process that enables teachers to become professional (Dean, 1991). Fullan (2001) states that PD enhances a person's learning experiences, which are formal or informal, throughout his/her career life from the starting point of a profession to retirement. This entails that teachers are assumed to be participants in PD activities and are the ones whose qualification is upgraded. According to the OECD (2010), PD is defined as well-planned activities incorporating training and continuous professional formation to prepare teachers for their profession regarding their personal and professional knowledge and skills. In this sense, this definition implies that PD is a deliberate action taken by teachers and carried out when teachers are on duty so that they can become more competent in their profession.

Like the term *professional development*, *teacher professional development* (TPD) is studied and presented in many ways. Hoyle (1982) and Glatthorn (1995) see the concepts of teacher professional development differently. Hoyle (1982) firstly defined TPD as “a process in which a teacher continues to develop the knowledge and skills required for effective teaching practices as circumstances change and as new responsibilities are accepted” and secondly as “knowledge acquisition and skill development” (p.164). Meanwhile, Glatthorn (1995) drew attention to the fact that teacher professional development aims to address the individual teacher’s professional growth and enhancement as well as the school and systemic context. Despite being studied and presented differently, those definitions are suggested that teacher development is the professional growth a teacher achieves as a result of increasingly gaining experiences and examining his or her teaching practices systematically.

Moreover, for EFL teachers, the term *professional development* is mainly associated with activities for enhancing language proficiency and teaching methodology (Freeman, 2017). Thus, the working definition of TPD in this study is proposed that TPD involves all activities, ranging from formal to informal, which EFL teachers consciously engage in to enhance their language proficiency (i.e., general language proficiency, classroom language proficiency). Those activities aim at making teachers more competent, confident, and comfortable when applying the knowledge and skills they have accumulated in their teaching practices.

EFL teachers’ language proficiency maintenance

Literature on the field of foreign LPM suggests that in a context where English is used mostly inside classrooms, English language proficiency may attrite over time if English is not frequently used or practiced (Schmid, 2011; Schmid & Mehotcheva, 2012). Schmid and Mehotcheva (2012) state that “unlike first and second language, foreign language acquisition (and presumably foreign language attrition) is not a linear process” (p.11). There are many factors involved in the acquisition (and attrition), including the learners’ linguistic and extra-linguistic factors. The extra-linguistic factors are personal (age, age at the onset of attrition, attained proficiency, and attitude and motivation) and external (time since onset of attrition, language contact and use and/or length of exposure to the language).

Upon the cease of formal training from universities, institutes, or language proficiency training workshops, most English language teachers may face problems of maintaining their achieved language proficiency level. Maintaining language proficiency is often the biggest concern of many foreign language users since unlike other skills or knowledge of other subjects, language proficiency is strongly influenced by the rule “use it or lose it”. Indeed, Peyton (1997) stated that “regardless of the skills and knowledge that foreign language teachers possess when they commence teaching, maintenance and improvement must be an ongoing process” (p.3). According to Włosowicz (2017), “language attrition can involve the gradual loss of different language skills, not only of accuracy but also of fluency and complexity, which can be assumed to be particularly visible in teachers whose contact with English is limited mainly to teaching” (p.80). Thus, once the language is not used or practiced (i.e., neglected), both the knowledge of the language and the ability to use it will be lost.

In short, language teachers need constant practice and use of the language so as to maintain their language proficiency. Teachers' LPM is associated with activities teachers intentionally take to maintain and develop their gained or achieved LVP. This is particularly important to those teachers who often do not have opportunities to use the target language they have learnt frequently outside the classroom context and very often face the risk of losing the proficiency they have gained. In this study, teachers' LPM refers to the strategies and activities intentionally taken by EFL teachers after having attended the training workshops to maintain the achieved LVP so that they are able to teach the target language and to use that language to communicate effectively.

2.2. Previous studies

Several studies (e.g., Nunan, 1991; Valmori, 2014; Zuhairini, 2010; Włosowicz, 2017) have been carried out in various contexts to explore factors affecting teachers' LPM and activities they implemented to maintain their language proficiency. However, little seems to be done in exploring in-service EFL high school teachers' LPM as well as strategies they implemented to maintain the achieved LVP.

Nunan (1991) conducted a study to investigate 44 language learners and EFL teachers in Hong Kong, Thailand, Indonesia, the Philippines, Singapore, and Malaysia. The results showed that there were eight main strategies that good language learners and EFL teachers use inside and outside classroom, including i) making communication with native speakers outside class, ii) reading various kinds of printed materials in English, iii) listening to native speakers through radio and TV, listening to music and singing songs, iv) watching TV and cinema, v) visiting English speaking countries for communicating with native speakers, vi) practicing through conversation with proficient speakers in English and using the media, vii) creating a social interaction (exposure and practice the language) at home and with friends, and viii) practicing English language outside the classroom. Moreover, Nunan (1991) emphasized LPM is considered an essential element for EFL teachers' professional development when the target language is seldom used outside the classroom.

Research in the area of maintaining strategies is even more popular. Zuhairini (2010) carried out a study on identifying types of strategies that EFL teachers in Indonesia used to maintain proficiency. The study included 93 participants who were given two sets of instruments, a Likert-scale questionnaire of English proficiency maintenance strategies and a TOEFL test at the post-graduate program of the Islamic University of Malang. Results have indicated that there were nine types of maintaining strategies, of which the language focusing strategies (e.g., *identifying text structure when reading, paying attention to the correctness of pronunciation when communicating, paying attention to the language of other speakers when in a conversation, practicing the learned grammar both in speaking and writing, analyzing grammatical mistakes in writing, and learning from grammatical mistakes*) were found to be the most intensively used by the teachers. Meanwhile, radio listening strategies (e.g., dealing with activities to listen to radio programs such as American VOA, British BBC, and Australian ABC) were the least level of intensity.

Similarly, Valmori (2014) focused on EFL teachers and found that teachers should develop and maintain their language proficiency through “the Internet, TV and movies in the FL, newsletters by teachers’ associations, books, summer trips and a nationwide foreign-language teachers’ organization which organized activities for professional development for the different languages” (p.18).

Additionally, Włosowicz (2017), in a study on language proficiency, language maintenance, and language attitudes, reported that teachers do try to maintain their proficiency levels in English by using the language in many different ways, such as reading books and articles in English, watching films in English, and talking to native speakers. The available linguistic resources such as films, lectures, and newspapers in the foreign language provide language teachers with useful activities and opportunities to develop and maintain their language skills. Włosowicz (2017) suggested that language knowledge and skills have to be constantly maintained so that the effectiveness of teaching and learning can be enhanced and on-the-job learning strategies can be provided for language teachers to sustain their on-going professional development.

The emphasis on language maintenance is mostly felt in EFL contexts, where most teachers do not have many opportunities of communicating with native speakers of English (Berry, 1990; Cullen, 1994), which is also the case of Vietnam. While the efforts to improve Vietnamese EFL teachers’ language proficiency have been vast and costly on the national level, the effect of those efforts can only be reflected first and foremost by the stakeholders, especially the teachers themselves. This research is believed to provide unique insights into factors affecting EFL teachers’ LPM and what they do to handle the factors to maintain the achieved LVP after leaving the training workshops.

3. Research methodology

3.1. Research questions

This study aims to address the following research questions:

1. *What are main factors affecting the Central Highland EFL high school teachers’ English language proficiency maintenance?*
2. *What do these high school EFL teachers do to maintain the achieved level of language proficiency?*

3.2. Research design

The study employed a mixed methods approach with concurrent research design and content-based data analysis, in which the researcher collected both quantitative and qualitative data concurrently (Creswell, 2009). This approach allowed the researcher to employ different data collection methods to address different research questions, and it could result in well-validated and substantiated findings (Creswell, 2009). The adoption of the mixed methods approach helped the researcher tackle the large data set collection and contributed to provide insights into high school teachers’ maintaining the achieved LVP and factors affecting their LPM. In the

quantitative dimension, the study used a survey. The qualitative dimension of the research contained reflective reports and interviews.

3.3. Participants

A total of 150 high school teachers participated in this study. The female teachers outnumbered the male teachers by more than five to one. The teachers had an average of 9.87 years of teaching experience, ranging from 2 to more than 15 years. Only eight teachers (12%) experienced under 5 years of teaching whereas the rest had more than 5 years of teaching, which reflects that most of the participants were experienced EFL teachers. With reference to academic qualifications, all the teacher participants had studied English as a foreign language, 18 teachers (12%) graduated from the teacher training colleges whereas 90 (60%) achieved a Bachelor's degree and the others 42 (28%) held a Master's degree. Half of the participants were key or team leader teachers and the rest were those without any administrative positions in school. Eighty-five teachers (58%) were teaching big classes with more than 41 students, thirty-three (22%) taught classes from 35 to 40 students, and only eleven (11%) of the teachers were teaching classes with less than 35 students. Their schools were located in different areas, only 17 out of 63 schools were in or around the city centers of both provinces. Many of them had to travel from 10km to more than 42 km to their school every day. The rate of ethnic minority students in both provinces was quite high, about 26% in KonTum and 23% in Gia Lai, which was considered a big constraint for teachers teaching English. Students were at different levels of English within one class. Many of the ethnic minority students could not communicate in Vietnamese (L1) well, thus, it was not easy for the teachers to cater for all their students' learning needs because of the lack of classroom communication both in English and Vietnamese.

3.3. Data collection instruments

Questionnaires, reflective reports, and interviews were used to collect data for the study. These data sources are complimentary to one another when it comes to research on perceptions (Creswell, 2009).

Questionnaire

The first instrument was the questionnaire. A questionnaire was used to collect demographic information of the participants. This includes information about gender, age, school location, years of teaching experience, professional qualifications, their level of language proficiency, the number of English language proficiency workshops they have attended, the administrative positions at school, and their weekly teaching hours, average number of students in a classroom, and the information of ethnic minority students.

The questionnaire was developed based mainly on Hulstijn (2011) and Freeman's (2015) framework of language proficiency, and kept in view all the significant aspects of EFL teachers' English LPM. It consisted of 2 question items (5 Likert scale items and 1 optional question) to investigate the participants' perceptions of the helpfulness of LPM strategies and the frequency of implementing LPM strategies. Participants responded to a scale from 1 (not helpful at all or never) to 5 (very helpful or very often). The data were coded and analyzed with SPSS version 20 to derive the descriptive data. The questionnaire was written in English and had to be answered

in English because the target respondents are English teachers. However, any answer in Vietnamese was acceptable due to the respondents' preferences and comfort with using the Vietnamese.

Reflective report

The second and third instruments were the reflective report and semi-structured interview that were created collaboratively by the researchers to better understand the teachers' LPM. The teachers' agreement to participate in a more in-depth study at the end of the questionnaire administration as well as responses to a subset of questions from the online questionnaire were used to identified data and selected participants for further investigation.

Similar to the development of the questionnaire, the reflective report was also developed based mainly on Hulstijn (2011) and Freeman's (2015) framework of language proficiency, and kept in view all the significant aspects of EFL teachers' English LPM. The reflective report consisted of three questions designed to investigate difficulties and challenges that the teachers faced and strategies and activities they implemented to maintain the achieved LVP.

To explore factors affecting the teachers' LPM and strategies they implemented to maintain the achieved LVP, the reflective report was sent to fifty-eight teachers (37 teachers in Gia Lai and 21 in KonTum) who voluntarily agreed to write a reflective report. They were asked to write about at least two activities they wished to do to maintain the achieved LVP, challenges or difficulties that prevented their LPM. They were also encouraged to elaborate as much as they thought it was relevant in their responses.

Interview

Twenty-two teachers participated in the interviews. The interview was structured around two main questions to elicit and identify factors affecting the teachers' LPM and strategies they implemented to maintain the achieved LVP. Apart from the major interview questions, whenever relevant, emerging questions related to the information provided by the participants in the reflective reports were also asked so that the researcher could collect more insightful understandings of the strategies the teachers implemented to maintain the level of language proficiency they achieved.

Before the interviews, the participants were asked if they would like to be interviewed in Vietnamese or English. All of them preferred to use Vietnamese. Hence, the interviews were conducted in Vietnamese language and recorded for later transcription and analysis. All interviews were voice-recorded. Each participant was interviewed once, and the average length of the interviews was 15 minutes, ranging from 8.5 to 20 minutes. To provide quotations of the participants' voices in English, the researcher translated the interview transcriptions into English.

3.4. Data collection procedure

To obtain the data for the study, the official permission from the DOETs in Gia Lai and Kon Tum was granted before contacting the English language teachers at the high schools in these provinces. After gaining consents from the teacher participants, the questionnaire was sent via

their email address and Zalo account. Later, after collecting and identifying data in the questionnaire, the reflective report was sent via email with careful instructions and explanations of terms and the deadline of the report to the teachers, who had responded a subset of question items concerning difficulties the teachers faced when implementing strategies to maintain the achieved LVP and in the questionnaire. The participants were given up to six weeks to complete their report and also encouraged to be elaborate on what? as much as they thought it was relevant in their responses. The interviews were done at the later stage of the study with those who agreed to be interviewed. The interview questions were also sent to the teachers via email, so the teachers could read them carefully before the interviews were scheduled and conducted.

3.5. Data analysis

A mixed-methods approach was found to be appropriate for this present study because the reflective report and interview data complimented the questionnaire data (Creswell, 2012). The questionnaire data provided the high school teachers' perceptions of the usefulness of LPM activities and the frequency of their implementation of the activities. The reflective report and interview data provided more insights into the teachers' implementing strategies and activities to maintain the achieved LVP and factors affecting their LPM. Hence, in this study, two types of data were analyzed.

Firstly, Frequency, Percentage, Standard deviation and Mean scores of the responses to each item on the questionnaire were calculated, using Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) 20 (IBM Corp, 2011) and Microsoft Office Excel to derive the descriptive data. Regarding teachers' perceptions of the necessity of the training workshops in the first research question, the Cronbach's Alpha for the questionnaire was established to check for a satisfactory level for reliability analysis. According to Taber (2018), if a scale has the Cronbach's Alpha coefficient value of 0.7 or above, it has internal consistency. By statistics, the reliability analysis of the questionnaire was demonstrated in Table 1.

Table 1. Reliability of the Questionnaire

Reliability Statistics	
Cronbach's Alpha	Number of Items
.746	20

As seen, the Cronbach Alpha for the 13 items was at .746, which means that the questionnaire scale was reliable. Secondly, the data collected from the opened-ended questions in the questionnaires, reflective reports, and interviews were analyzed qualitatively using the content analysis (e.g., content codes, text, themes, patterns, interpretation) (Creswell, 2009). This involved creating codes and content qualitatively, then counting the number of times they occur in the text data, and entering carefully into a computer database for data triangulation (Creswell, 2009). Then, results from different sources of data were compared, integrated and interpreted (Morgan, 2014).

4. Findings and Discussions

4.1. EFL high school teachers' perceived factors affecting their language proficiency maintenance

The results have illustrated that the teachers thought they had limited opportunities for their language proficiency improvement and maintenance and did not regularly use English outside their classroom because of the following difficulties and challenges. The first difficulty was thought to be limited opportunities for teacher professional development such as attending training workshops, seminars, conferences, accessing English language teacher support resources (online and on site), speaking English with foreign people, and joining exchange programs in countries where English is used as a mother tongue, ect. The following extracts illustrate the points.

"I rarely used English outside classroom because there were not any foreigners in my home town as well as no native teachers had a contract of teaching English at our school as encouraged by Project 2020 (RF.KT. Teacher 29, Email received date 11.8.2019).

"Two years ago, my school leader invited a foreign language teacher who was from South Africa to teach speaking skills for our grade 10 and 11 students. She taught English at our school for two years and I had good opportunity to improve my English skills (KT.Teacher 5, Interview 5, 10.10.2019).

The results indicate that only key or team leader teachers were frequently selected to participate in workshops, seminars, or conferences held by the DOET or the MOET. It is worth noting that their linguistic and oral communicative skills in English remain a matter of concern since the teachers had few opportunities to attend professional development activities and they rarely met or communicated with foreigners. In the interviews, there were teachers (#5, #9) living in or around the city centers and being key teachers reported that they were certainly able to develop and maintain the speaking and listening skills while the others (#6, #29) admitted that they found it hard to develop and maintain listening and speaking skills.

"After achieving CEFR-C1 level on the first assessment by the DOET, I was chosen to study in Malaysia for 6 weeks. That was, perhaps the best opportunities for me to meet and communicate English with international teachers and students. (KT.Teacher 9, Interview 9, 12.10.2019).

"I rarely met a foreigner to speak English with her/him. Some years ago, I was not a key teacher or team leader, so I had fewer opportunities to attend teaching seminars or training workshops by the DOET or MOET" (GL. Teacher 6, Interview 6, 12.10.2019).

The reflective report and interview results have showed that the teachers faced difficulties developing higher level of speaking and listening skills as well as maintaining oral English language proficiency because the opportunities to attend teacher development activities were not provided for a majority of them. Noticeably, the result indicates although the training workshops were very helpful and necessary for the teachers, they were in the form of short-term workshops (e.g., one to three days). Hence, many training workshops seemed not to have a strong impact on their language proficiency development and maintenance due to the short duration of time. Those findings have demonstrated that, from the EFL teachers' perceptions, LPM is a co-construction of two tasks: teaching and learning. In other words, only by having ongoing opportunities to use, practice, and revise the English language can EFL teachers maintain and improve their

proficiency to be qualified to be good teachers of English, which further supports previous findings (e.g., Peyton, 1997; Schmid, 2011; Włosowicz, 2017). This seems to be particularly important to the EFL teachers in this study, whose working context and conditions tend to make them enact the teacher role rather than the learner role.

The second difficulty was the heavy workload at the workplace that led to the teachers' lack of time for professional development. See the following accounts.

"I was so busy teaching and doing other school tasks such as holding weekly meetings for teachers in English team, organizing extra curricula activities, observing other teachers' classrooms at school and designing tests. I had 24 classes per week. Thus I did not have opportunities to take part in many workshops or conferences" (KT.Teacher 1, Interview 1, 05.10.2019).

"I wish I had more time to maintain my language proficiency. However, for many recent years, I had to teach more than 24 periods per week because my school lacked teachers of English, no one could take over my teaching job and I did not have much time for renovating my teaching skills" (KT.Teacher 8, Interview 8, 12.10.2019).

Although the workload varied from schools to schools, the teachers reported that they had difficulty managing their time to improve and maintain their language proficiency because there were too many administrative duties or extra curriculum activities to do. The average teaching hours per week of each teacher was 19.66, which was 2.66 hours more than regulated. Some of the extracts below exemplify the points:

"My school did not have enough teachers teaching English, so I had to teach many classes for the whole school year. I could not manage time to take part in any professional development activities by the DOET." (GL.Teacher 12, Interview 12, 08.11.2019).

"I was so busy with my school work. Besides teaching, I was responsible for other work such as Vietnamese Union activities and administrative work" (GL.Teacher 22, Interview 22, 27.11.2019).

Due to the lack of teachers of English at the schools in the remote areas in Gia Lai and Kon Tum, many teachers (e.g., #1, #8, #12, #22) had to teach more than 30 periods a week and were responsible for administrative work. They also joined or held at least two extracurricular activities in English during a semester. In addition, some of them had to take over other work such as working as a form teacher, a librarian, a school laboratory teacher or an administrator of the school office. In practice, many teachers were also busy with not only teaching but retaining the total number of students in their class as well because the ethnic minority students often quitted class during the harvest time to help their family earn a living. This reflected that many teachers suffered from workload (both administrative and teaching load) and had little time for teaching preparation as well as for professional development. It should be taking into account the fact that the teaching profession implied not only class teaching hours, but also a lot of extra work (teaching other subjects, being a form teacher, planning, grading, holding extra-curricular activities, etc.).

Finally, big class size and other student-related factors were also thought as barriers that hinder the teachers from maintaining and developing their language proficiency. Among one hundred and fifty teachers, eighty-five (58%) teachers said that had big classes with more than 41 students, thirty-three (22%) teaching classes within from 35 to 40 students, and only eleven (11%)

teaching classes with fewer than 35 students. The teachers had to teach classes of 40.1 students, on average. The rate of ethnic minority students in both provinces was quite high, about 26% in Kon Tum 21% in Gia Lai, which was considered a big constraint for teachers teaching them English. The ethnic minority students' low level of Vietnamese language proficiency made it difficult for the teachers to cater for all their students' learning needs because of the lack of classroom communication both in Vietnamese and English. Some accounts from the interviews gave further information:

"My students were different in English LVP in one class, and many of them are ethnic minority ones, so I shouldn't always use English. I used L1 to make sure most students could understand the lessons" (GL.Teacher 18, Interview 18, 24.11.2019).

"Most of my students did not want to study English. A majority of ethnic minority students were too shy to speak English. Therefore, using English to give instructions or to organize interactive activities in classroom did not always bring effectiveness" (GL.Teacher 21, Interview 21, 27.11.2019).

"I had difficulties in using English frequently inside classroom because of the limited and different levels of students in a class. My students did not understand my English even though I tried to use the simplest language to give instructions or explanations" (GL.Teacher 14, Interview 14, 21.11.2019).

It is clear that large class size, students' low motivation in English learning, a high rate of ethnic minority students, and students' different levels of English within one class were other constraints hindering the teachers' efforts of using English in the classroom. While most of the teachers thought they were aware of frequently using English in classroom would bring many benefits for both teachers and students to develop higher LVP, maintaining oral skills was not very easy for them since both teachers and students did not frequently use English in the classroom.

As can be seen, from the EFL teachers' perceptions, external extra-linguistic factors (Schmid & Mehotcheva, 2012) were the most influential to their English proficiency maintenance and improvement. The teachers overvalued the roles of formal training/ education and target language contact/ use rather than personal factors such as age or self-motivation in the maintenance and development of their achieved proficiency levels. The results have strengthened those of Nunan (1991) and Harmer (2007) and contributed to a more holistic understanding of EFL teachers' strategies in improving their professional knowledge and skills as found by Zuhairini (2010) and Valmori (2014) in that this study's findings have illustrated the complexity of EFL teachers' perceptions reflected by different discourse and context-based constraints hindering the teachers' effort to maintain and enhance their proficiency levels.

While there were many factors hindering teachers' LPM, many teachers reported that the usefulness of the training aspects was believed to be supporting factors contributing to their language proficiency improvement. Many teachers reported that the flexibility of the training, and the provision of English knowledge and skills through the appropriate training modes (both online and onsite) were contributing to help them maintain the required LVP. They thought that they received good supplement to enhance their English knowledge and skills as a result of the usefulness of the training workshops. Having adequate training course books and materials for

reference also contributed to their LPM. On sharing the usefulness of the training aspects, the following teachers' reports exemplify the points.

"I enjoyed learning online and offline during the training because it helped me manage my time flexibly. The trainers supported me and sent reminding messages on my studying tasks, which was helpful." (RF.GL.Teacher 51, Email received date 29.8.2019).

"The training held and lasted during summer time was very convenient because I did not have to be responsible for school work at that time" (RF.KT.Teacher 30, Email received date 11.8.2019).

"I learned from the trainer teachers how to be flexible in using English in my classroom; The given training materials and delivered handouts helped me revise and enhance my knowledge and skills." (RF.KT.Teacher 18, Email received date 29.8.2019).

The result has confirmed the essential role of training for in-service EFL teachers and again demonstrate that professional development of EFL teachers should be congruent with the opportunities to be trained to become EFL teachers because for them, general English competency is not enough to become good teachers of English (Pham, 2018).

In summary, despite some supporting factors, the teachers had many difficulties due to the lack of a supportive environment to practice English. These main factors are considered to affect their LPM.

4.2. Strategies implemented by the teachers to maintain the achieved level of proficiency

Regarding the frequency of implementing strategies to maintain the achieved LVP, the teachers were asked to respond to the questionnaire questions numbered from 1 to 10. The teachers responded to the questions by choosing a number from 1 to 5 (with 1 *never* (NE), 2 *rarely* (RA), 3 *sometimes* (ST), 4 *often* (OF), and 5 *very often* (VO)). Their responses are presented in Table 2 below.

Table 2. The Frequency of Teachers' Implementing Language Proficiency Maintenance Strategies

Statements	Scales					M	SD
	NE	RA	ST	OF	VO		
	1	2	3	4	5		
1. Seeking opportunities to practice English with native speakers	2 1.3%	52 34.7%	61 40.7%	31 20.7%	4 2.7%	2.89	.84
2. Creating different formal forums/ environment to use English (regular English teacher meetings)	0 0%	4 2.7%	12 8.0%	79 52.7%	55 36.7%	4.23	.71
3. Actively establishing informal environments (creating English speaking day at school) for English language use	0 0%	6 4.0%	9 6%	81 54%	54 36%	4.22	.73
4. Regularly and actively accessing authentic, rich English language inputs (films, Ted Talks, YouTube videos)	0 0%	2 1.3%	16 10.7%	76 50.7%	56 37.3%	4.24	.69
5. Frequently revising knowledge of the target language (e.g, doing grammar exercise, practicing listening, reading, writing skills)	0 0%	2 1.3%	9 6.0%	78 52%	61 40.7%	4.32	.65

6. Frequently referring to English language teacher support resources (online and on site)	0 0%	2 1.3%	7 4.7	92 61.3%	49 32.7%	4.25	.60
7. Constantly making an effort to teach English in English	3 2.0%	4 2.7%	8 5.3%	84 56%	51 34%	4.17	.81
8. Paying for private lessons (with native or near native speakers to improve English language proficiency)	18 12%	53 35.3%	57 38%	21 14%	1 0.7%	2.56	.90
9. Joining a network of teachers returning from English language training workshops to create an English speaking community	14 9.3%	46 30.7%	59 39.3%	26 17.3%	5 3.3%	2.75	.96
10. Joining exchange programs in countries where English is used as a mother tongue	31 20.7%	66 44%	40 26.7%	11 7.3%	2 1.3%	2.25	.91

Table 2 shows that the implementation of each strategy was at considerably different levels of frequency. More than half of the strategies were implemented at a high level of frequency, with the means ranging from 4.17 to 4.32, while the rest of the strategies got the lower means, from 2.25 to 2.89. To begin with, the most regularly implemented strategy was found in item 5 ($M = 4.32, SD = .65$). Specifically, 92.7% of the teachers thought they implemented this strategy often or very often, 26% teachers sometimes and only 1.3% rarely implemented this. The other strategies that were also thought to be implemented at high frequencies were (items 6, 4, 2, 3, and 7) *frequently referring to English language teacher support resources* ($M = 4.25, SD = .60$), *regularly and actively accessing authentic, rich English language inputs* ($M = 4.24, SD = .69$), *creating different formal forums or environment to use English* ($M = 4.23, SD = .71$), *actively establishing informal environments for English language use* ($M = 4.22, SD = .73$), and *constantly making an effort to teach English in English* ($M = 4.17, SD = .81$). The least frequently implemented one was found in item 10 ($M = 2.25, SD = .91$). As can be seen, only 8.6% of the teachers thought they implemented this strategy often or very often, 26.7% sometimes while about 65% rarely or never implemented this. The situation was repeated on item 8 ($M = 2.56, SD = .90$) when 47.3% of the teachers thought they rarely or never paid for private lessons, only 23.4% often had a tendency to improve English language proficiency with the help of native or near native speakers. Regarding item 9 ($M = 2.75, SD = .96$), there were about 39% of the teachers thought they sometimes and 40% rarely or never implemented this strategy. Similarly, for the last strategy, item 1 ($M = 2.89, SD = .84$), there were about 40% of the teacher thought they sometimes and 36% rarely or never implemented this strategy. In short, the teachers thought that they frequently implemented the strategies of items 5, 6, 4, 2, 3, and 7 while the strategies of items 1, 8, 9, 10 were never or rarely implemented.

The triangulation of the questionnaire, reflective report, and interview data has indicated that the teachers were aware of implementing different activities to maintain the achieved LVP. In the open-ended questionnaire question, the teachers suggested that officially observing other teachers' classrooms, self-studying through means of media, making use of the internet, and participating in contests for EFL teachers were useful activities they often engaged

in to maintain their LVP. The following accounts from the open-ended questionnaire questions illustrate the points.

Extract 1: *“I found classroom observation useful and I maintained to visit my colleagues’ classroom at least twice a month. I learned from them many things interesting such as to how to use English to manage classroom and how to provide students with authentic English language input”.*

Extract 2: *“I wrote Teachers’ Initiative Report (Sang kien kinh Nghiem) every year as a way of improving and maintaining my English proficiency. I sometimes took part in contests for language teachers such as Giao vien day gioi, giao vien chu nhiem gioi”.*

Extract 3: *“I did many self-study activities to maintain and develop my language knowledge and skills. I wrote diary in English. I often watched English films without sub-titles and listened to foreign programs such as TED Talks, VOA, BBC news to practice my English skills.*

The results suggest that the teachers thought among the suggested strategies, frequently revising knowledge of the target language was the most useful strategy. The teachers reported that they implemented this strategy most frequently. Some commonly implemented activities are further described in details by the teachers in the reflective reports and interviews as follow.

“I implemented many self-study activities at home to maintain and improve my language knowledge and skills such as reading graded books, doing practice tests online (reading, listening and grammar) (RF.KT.Teacher 25, Email received date 08.8.2019).

“Every year, I registered to join national conferences and provincial teaching competitions as activities to improve and update my knowledge and skills. I also followed post-graduate studies. (RF.GL.Teacher 57, Email received date 29.8.2019).

“I tried to practice language skills by reading newspapers, listening to English news and watching movies without subtitles, and grammar points online at home. It was convenient since I could access to the Internet” (RF.GL.Teacher 46, Email received date 28th August, 2019).

In addition, many teachers reported that after leaving the language proficiency training workshops, they tried to maintain their achieved LVP by implementing many different activities.

“I often watched and listened to foreign programs such as TED Talks, VOA, BBC news to practice English skills (GL.Teacher 7, Interview 7, 12.10.2019).

“I often listened to English music, English news and watched movies which not only enlarged my vocabulary but improved my listening skill as well. I preferred to listen to Ted talk speeches since they were helpful (KT.Teacher 5, Interview 5, 10.10.2019).

“I participated in in-service teacher professional development activities held by the DOET or MOET such as teacher contests, seminars, conferences as a participant or a presenter, and training workshops, which helped me improve and maintain my proficiency” (GL.Teacher 19, Interview 19, 24.11.2019).

“I paid attention to using English frequently when teaching. I often searched for authentic language sources in the internet to make lessons more interesting and to motivate my students. By exploiting online materials, I had chances to develop writing, listening and reading skills” (KT.Teacher 03, Interview 03, 05.10.2019).

The results have showed that the teachers reported they often visited other teachers' classrooms; participated in in-service teacher professional development activities such as attending and presenting at seminars, conferences and workshops for EFL teachers; wrote journals or articles relating to English language teaching and learning held by the DOET or MOET; practiced listening, reading, writing skills, doing grammar exercises; actively accessed English language teacher support resources online to provide students with rich and authentic language inputs, and followed post-graduate studies. This finding is in accord with many researchers (e.g., Nunan, 1991; Valmori, 2014; Zuhairini, 2010; Włosowicz, 2017) who found these activities necessary and effective for EFL teachers to maintain their LVP.

Apart from in-service teacher professional development activities such as seminars, conferences and workshops, which were obligatory, the teachers in the Central Highland were aware of the significance of self-study activities using the internet. As reported, joining exchange programs in countries where English is used as a mother tongue and paying for private lessons (with native or near native speakers to improve English language proficiency) were among strategies believed to be useful for teachers' LPM. However, it was difficult for teachers to get a scholarship or admission for exchange programs in a foreign country and it was also costly. Therefore, self-studying activities using the internet (e.g., doing test of English online, listening to VOA, BBC to improve listening skills, watching films in English with sub-titles) were thought to be useful and easy to do by the teachers. Self studying activities to maintain the achieved LVP seem to reflect the teachers' responsibility, flexibility, preferences, and motivation in their LPM. This finding is in alignment with Yashiro's (1992) research result that it is learners' motivation and attitude but not their age and LVP that affect their LPM. In the context of lacking authentic language environment, that in-service EFL teachers actively implemented activities to maintain their achieved level of proficiency is encouraging.

5. Conclusions and implications

This study draws a conclusion that while the teachers in the Central Highland of Vietnam faced many difficulties such as suffering heavy workload at the workplace, lacking supportive environment of practicing English, and having limited opportunities to participate in teacher professional development activities, they made efforts to implement different strategies and activities to maintain their achieved LVP. Although the findings of this study are by no means conclusive, the locally contextual factors provide us with some insights into post-training activities implemented by the teachers for their LPM.

Teachers with heavy workloads and limited opportunities to use English both inside and outside classroom require time and chances to focus on their own language learning and maintenance needs. It is recommended that DOETs and school leaders be conscious of the challenges hindering teachers' LPM so that administrative tasks at school should be minimized, and an online school library should be equipped for teachers to get access to facilitation of teaching and to sustain their self-studying skills.

In the Vietnamese context, the level of EFL teachers' language proficiency was specified (i.e., CEFR-C1 level) in government policy in 2008 (Government, 2008). Since then this policy has been successfully translated for and incorporated into EFL teachers' language

proficiency training. The study suggests that geographical and motivational traits should be taken into consideration when designing training workshops. It is necessary that English language proficiency maintenance activities should be provided and integrated into in-service teacher professional development so as to help teachers maintain the achieved level of proficiency. The immersion programs in English speaking countries may be introduced to EFL teachers as they may provide teachers with opportunities to work with experts in authentic language speaking environment.

The study has some limitations, which, in turn, provide some suggestions for further research. First, this study focused on LPM carried out by EFL high school teachers in the Gia Lai and Kon Tum provinces only. As such, future studies might need to delve into how EFL teachers at other levels of education implement strategies to maintain their achieved LVP. Second, only teachers' perceptions of factors affecting their language proficiency and strategies they implemented to maintain the achieved LVP were explored in this study, with a limited number of participants. Future research can expand this line of inquiry. Developing or adapting a more comprehensive questionnaire, reflective report and interview, and validating the instruments with a large number of random samples of participants can boost the validity and reliability of the instruments and findings. Likewise, in-depth case studies of teachers may also shed more light on teachers' practices in handling difficulties and implementing strategies to maintain the achieved LVP.

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NGHIÊN CỨU VIỆC DUY TRÌ NĂNG LỰC NGOẠI NGỮ CỦA GIÁO VIÊN TIẾNG ANH CẤP TRUNG HỌC PHỔ THÔNG Ở KHU VỰC MIỀN TRUNG TÂY NGUYÊN

Tóm tắt: Nghiên cứu này xem xét việc duy trì năng lực ngoại ngữ của giáo viên tiếng Anh cấp trung học phổ thông khu vực miền Trung Tây nguyên, Việt Nam. Số liệu nghiên cứu được thu thập từ kết quả khảo sát, viết hồi tưởng và phỏng vấn 150 giáo viên tiếng Anh đã đạt được chứng chỉ C1 sau các khóa bồi dưỡng năng lực ngoại ngữ dành cho giáo viên THPT do Đề án ngoại ngữ quốc gia 2020 tổ chức. Số liệu được xử lý bằng phần mềm thống kê SPSS 20.0. Kết quả nghiên cứu cho thấy mặc dù có nhiều khó khăn cản trở việc giáo viên duy trì năng lực ngoại ngữ, phần lớn giáo viên đã nỗ lực thực hiện nhiều hoạt động nhằm duy trì năng lực đã đạt được. Kết quả nghiên cứu là tài liệu tham khảo hữu ích cho các nhà nghiên cứu, các nhà quản lý, các đối tượng có liên quan nghiên cứu, đề xuất những tác động phù hợp, nhằm nâng cao chất lượng các khóa bồi dưỡng năng lực ngoại ngữ cho giáo viên, góp phần nâng cao hiệu quả việc duy trì năng lực ngoại ngữ của giáo viên trong bối cảnh hiện nay.

Từ khóa: Giáo viên tiếng Anh, việc duy trì năng lực ngoại ngữ, phát triển nghiệp vụ, Việt Nam.