A MULTI-TIER PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT ECOSYSTEM: A CASE STUDY AT A PRIVATE LANGUAGE CENTER

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Abstract: *This study explores how professional development (PD) programs are implemented at a private English language center in the Mekong Delta, Vietnam, to support EFL teachers' learning. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with 12 participants (one academic leader, three mentor-coordinators, one coordinator, and seven EFL teachers) and document analysis, and were analyzed thematically through the lens of Knowles's adult learning theory. Findings show that the center operates a multi-tier PD ecosystem in which multiple formats run concurrently at center-wide and team-based levels and are extended by individualized pathways across career stages; programs are designed through structured yet context-sensitive processes; teacher participation is voluntary in principle but graduated by role and career stage and reinforced by certification and salary-linked incentives; and provision is well resourced although formal evaluation of classroom transfer remains limited. Implications are proposed for designing andragogically responsive PD programs in private language centers.*

Keywords: *Professional development, EFL teachers, private language center, adult learning theory, case study.*

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I. INTRODUCTION

Professional development (PD) is widely regarded as a key mechanism for improving teaching quality, understood as the range of formal and informal activities through which teachers develop the knowledge, skills, and dispositions required for effective practice across their careers. Similarly, Avalos (2011) highlights that PD is fundamentally about enabling teachers to learn and apply new knowledge in ways that enhance student learning, underscoring the importance of teachers' capacity to translate professional learning into practice. Professional development programs are organized and goal-oriented interventions designed to enhance teachers' knowledge, instructional practices, and attitudes, ultimately aiming to improve student learning outcomes (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017; Guskey, 2000); whereas PD activities such as workshops, mentoring, and peer observation are their building blocks, PD programs provide the structural foundation that organizes these activities into a sustained process of teacher change. Effective PD programs are content-focused, collaborative, sustained, and supported by coaching, modeling, feedback, and reflection (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017; Desimone, 2009). Nevertheless, as Guskey (2000, 2002) has long argued, PD evaluation rarely moves beyond participation and satisfaction to examine whether learning transfers into classroom practice and student outcomes. In Vietnam, where English proficiency has become a national priority and English operates as the working language of international exchange (Huang & Fang, 2023), PD for EFL teachers has been strongly promoted; however, its impact depends largely on how it is designed, organized, and experienced by teachers.

International research on EFL teachers' PD points to both promise and constraint. Sadeghi and Richards (2021) reported low engagement with formal PD and heavy reliance on informal learning among Iranian English teachers, while Azaza et al. (2023) documented how top-down provision constrained teacher agency. Studies of specific models – critical friendship (Chien, 2024), virtual coaching (Zimmer & Matthews, 2022), and job-embedded PD (Morton, 2025) – suggest that discipline-specific, practical, and reflective PD improves outcomes, yet this body of work typically examines a single PD model in isolation rather than how an institution organizes multiple formats as a whole (Rombaoa Tanaka et al., 2020). In Vietnam, existing studies have examined job-embedded practices (Dau, 2020), adult learning frameworks (Ngo, 2021), communities of practice (Tran, 2022), professional learning communities (Nguyen et al., 2023), and training programs (Phong, 2025), collectively revealing persistent constraints of top-down policies, limited time, and insufficient resources (Duy, 2025; Nghi, 2025; Toan, 2025). Notably, most of this research

is set in public schools or universities and focuses on a single PD model; almost no empirical work documents the full architecture of PD within a private EFL center in the Mekong Delta, whose organizational structures and managerial cultures differ markedly from public systems.

This study is framed by Knowles's andragogy, defined as "the art and science of helping adults learn" (Knowles, 1980, p. 43). Andragogy rests on six assumptions about adult learners: the need to know, self-concept, prior experience, readiness to learn, a problem-centered orientation to learning, and internal motivation (Knowles, 1980; Knowles et al., 2014). These assumptions supply design criteria against which institutional PD provision for adult professionals can be evaluated: PD that front-loads abstract theory tends to lose its audience; provision positioned as something done to teachers clashes with their professional self-concept; and reliance on extrinsic incentives risks producing compliance without commitment.

Addressing the gaps above, this article aims to examine the PD programs implemented at a private English language center to support EFL teachers' learning, and to analyze them against the principles of Knowles's andragogy, guided by the research question: How are professional development programs implemented at a private English language center to support EFL teachers' learning?

II. RESEARCH CONTENT

2.1. Research methods

This study adopted a qualitative approach, which is well suited to examining the meanings individuals assign to their experiences and to understanding a phenomenon in its natural complexity rather than measuring it quantitatively (Creswell, 2013). Qualitative inquiry is fundamentally concerned with how people make sense of their world. In this study, that meant examining how teachers experience PD programs, negotiate expectations, and translate those experiences into pedagogical decisions in their own classrooms. Its emphasis on meaning, inductive analysis, the researcher as the primary instrument, and rich, thick description aligns directly with the aim of capturing teachers' lived experiences within the specific social setting of a private language center.

Within this approach, a single-case study design was employed (Yin, 2009). A case study is an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon in depth within its real-life context, particularly where the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident (Yin, 2014); it is well suited to exploring a bounded system through detailed, in-depth data from multiple sources (Creswell, 2013). Here, the "case" is the group of EFL teachers who participate in the PD programs provided by the center, a bounded system because they work within the same institutional environment, engage in the same PD programs, and are shaped by shared policies, expectations, and workplace conditions. This design was adopted because the research question concerns how PD programs are structured and organized within a real-life, bounded institutional context.

The study setting is a private English language center in the Mekong Delta, Vietnam, in operation for nearly 17 years and offering English programs for preschoolers, kids, teenagers, and adults. The center was purposively selected for its reputation for investing systematically in teachers' professional growth. To preserve anonymity, the center is not named and identifying details have been removed.

Twelve participants were recruited through purposive sampling to cover every role in the center's PD ecosystem: one academic leader (L1), three mentor-coordinators (M1–M3), one coordinator for the continuous professional development (CPD) program (C1), and seven EFL teachers (T1–T7) varying in experience from about one year to more than 14 years and teaching across preschool, kids, teens, and adult levels (Table 1). All participants were currently working at the center, had completed at least one full cycle of its PD programs, and consented to participate voluntarily; ethical principles of anonymity, confidentiality, and the right to withdraw were guaranteed.

Table 1. Demographic information of participants

Code	Role	Years of teaching	Teaching level
L1	Leader / program lead	More than 11 years	Young Learners / Teens
M1	Mentor / coordinator	9 years	Primary Kids
M2	Mentor / coordinator	More than 3 years	Primary Kids / Teens
M3	Mentor / coordinator	About 11 years	Preschool / Kids
C1	Coordinator	About 3 years	Adults
T1	Teacher	More than 14 years	Preschool / Adults
T2	Teacher (specialist)	About 9 years	Teens / Adults
T3	Teacher	About 6 years	Kids
T4	Teacher	About 1 year	Teens
T5	Teacher	About 1 year	Kids
T6	Teacher	About 1 year	Kids / Adults
T7	Teacher	About 1 year	Preschool

individually with all 12 participants using expert-reviewed, piloted role-specific guides adapted from a previously validated instrument (Menshakova, 2023) and aligned with the study's theoretical constructs through a question-to-construct matrix; interviews were recorded with consent and transcribed verbatim, with Vietnamese excerpts translated into English for reporting. Document analysis covered the Community of Practice (CoP) master plan and program description, the fast-track mentoring plan, the needs-analysis survey, CPD session materials, the peer observation and lesson reflection forms, the teacher salary-scale decision, and the CoP attendance list. Data were analyzed using thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke (2006) six-phase framework with a hybrid deductive–inductive coding strategy (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006), combining theory-driven codes from adult learning theory with inductively generated codes. Trustworthiness was supported through source triangulation, an audit trail, and thick description.

2.2. Research results and discussion

The four themes below are read not only descriptively but evaluatively, against the six criteria andragogy specifies for adult learning: the need to know, self-concept, the role of prior experience, readiness to learn, a problem-centered orientation, and internal motivation (Knowles, 1980; Knowles et al., 2014). Used as a yardstick rather than a label, these criteria hold the four themes together as a single argument, exposing where the center's architecture genuinely enacts adult-learning principles.

2.2.1. The center implements a diverse range of professional development programs

Analysis revealed that PD at the center is neither singular nor episodic; rather, it operates as an interconnected ecosystem of multiple formats running in parallel: Continuing Professional Development (CPD), a Community of Practice (CoP), peer observation, workshops, mentoring, fast-track training for new recruits, and an in-house TESOL course (L1). Teachers corroborated this multiplicity. T2 described "so many programs. First there is CPD, CoP, Peer Observation, Mentoring" (T2), while T3 actively distinguished a hierarchy between core and supplementary programs: "Three core programs are CoP, CPD and Peer Observation" (T3). PD is organized along two structural levels: "The center's large-scale program is CPD, and the team's is CoP, for the teaching community of the Young Learners of English (YLE) team" (M1), so that center-wide CPD addresses cross-cutting themes relevant to all teachers while team-based CoP enables level-specific learning. Individualized developmental pathways coexist with these collective programs, offering tailored support across career stages: the in-house TESOL track functions as a developmental route for teaching assistants transitioning into full teaching roles, mentoring supports newly hired teachers, and professional observation is institutionalized through a dedicated observation team in which "a group of teachers is assigned to observe both full-time and part-time in order to exchange and give professional feedback" (C1). The documentary

record including the needs-analysis survey, CoP master plan, and fast-track mentoring regulations confirms every format participants named, establishing that PD at the center is diverse, structurally layered, and pathway-differentiated.

This point stands in marked contrast to the dominant portrait of PD in comparable EFL settings: Sadeghi and Richards (2021) reported low overall engagement and a heavy reliance on informal, self-initiated learning among Iranian teachers, while several Vietnamese studies characterize PD as fragmented, top-down, or compliance-driven (Nghi, 2025; Ngo, 2021; Toan, 2025). The two-level architecture observed here partly echoes the dual structure Nguyen et al. (2023) found in Vietnamese primary schools, where professional groups coexisted with core-teacher groups, while the span of formalized, career-staged pathways resonates with the job-embedded model Dau (2020) advocated. Where Nguyen et al. (2023) found the effectiveness of such structures constrained by inflexible schedules and limited facilities, however, this center appears to have institutionalized its layered architecture more securely, a difference plausibly rooted in the organizational autonomy of a private provider, which can configure provision around its own teaching teams rather than around a mandated public-sector calendar. The significance of this finding lies less in the mere existence of several programs than in two features that previous studies of Vietnamese private-sector PD have not clearly named. First, teachers themselves distinguished a hierarchy between core programs and supplementary ones, indicating that they have truly experienced them. Second, the deliberate pairing of center-wide CPD with team-based CoP allows content to be differentiated by the audience it serves, mitigating the "one-size-fits-all" critique that recurs across the literature (Nghi, 2025; Toan, 2025). The career-spanning pathways, in turn, operationalize andragogy's emphasis on prior experience and readiness to learn: a teaching assistant on the TESOL track, a fast-track novice under mentoring, and a senior teacher in CoP are met with qualitatively different provision rather than a single undifferentiated offering (Knowles, 1980). Read together, these three structural features, concurrent formats, two-tier organization, and career-staged pathways, are best understood not as an accumulation of separate programs but as a single continuum of support, which is precisely what distinguishes an ecosystem from a menu.

2.2.2. PD programs are designed and organized through structured but context-sensitive processes

The second theme, drawing on the largest body of evidence, establishes that PD is the product of a structured but context-sensitive design process. First, PD operates on planned, recurring schedules across multiple time frames: an annual planning cycle, "In January and February at the start of the year, the team builds the annual plan" (L1), monthly or bimonthly CPD and CoP sessions (M2; M3), and longer individualized tracks, with the TESOL course spanning "about 6 to 8 months" (T5) and mentoring lasting four to twelve weeks depending on the teacher's readiness (M1). Second, sessions follow a deliberate theory-to-practice sequence anchored to explicit long-term goals: "Every CoP topic is tied to a theory" (T1), presented first, then demonstrated, then applied in collaborative lesson design (M1; T7). Third, content is informed by needs analysis through triangulated channels, surveys, classroom observation, and end-of-year reflection, although teachers tend to select from the options offered rather than propose their own: "they send a link to ask what activities we want to organize this year; they suggest and then we click to choose" (T2). Fourth, PD is designed and delivered primarily through internal expertise, experienced teachers as facilitators, with a volunteer-with-review pathway in which "you must submit your materials or have a discussion session with the leader before you can present" (T2), supplemented by selective external input such as invited lecturers and publisher-led sessions (T6). Fifth, mentoring is differentiated through structured pathways tailored to teacher entry route: "teachers who already have a class are supported with lesson planning and observation; entirely new teachers go through fast-track, including lesson planning, co-teaching and observation" (M2).

The multi-frame, recurring scheduling resembles the sustained, job-embedded provision advocated by Dau (2020) and Darling-Hammond et al. (2017), yet departs from the fast-paced, under-resourced training reported by Phong (2025) and Duy (2025), a difference that probably reflects the organizational autonomy of a private center, which can sustain continuity rather than

one-off events. The theory-to-practice sequence aligns with andragogy's problem-centered orientation, in which adults seek knowledge they can apply immediately (Knowles, 1980), and with evidence that practical, reflective PD improves outcomes (Ajani, 2022; Blanco Navarro et al., 2024; Jiang et al., 2021), although C1's acknowledgment that CPD provides "not much time for in-depth discussion of how to apply it to a specific lesson" suggests the practical component is insufficiently supported. The theory-to-practice sequence is thus double-edged: problem-centered in intent, yet liable to front-load theory at the expense of application, so its benefits are realized unevenly, a limitation that foreshadows the transfer challenges surfaced in the fourth theme. The central analytical insight is a tension that has not been sharply articulated in earlier Vietnamese studies: the center collects needs data more methodically than the "topic-of-the-month" pattern reported elsewhere, yet responsiveness at the input stage is limited less by the survey's design, which does invite open-ended input, than by teachers' documented reluctance to take up the open-response options it provides. Crucially, both the leader's account and the triangulated documentary evidence complicate a purely top-down reading: the needs-analysis instrument did contain open items inviting teachers to nominate urgent topics and volunteer as presenters, yet the leader acknowledged that "most teachers do not invest time in submitting suggestions" and instead select from the pre-existing topic list (L1). The constraint is therefore not solely structural but partly dispositional: the center has built the scaffolding for voice, but the self-direction andragogy expects of adult learners (Knowles et al., 2014) is not always taken up. This refines accounts of constrained agency under top-down provision (Azaza et al., 2023; Ngo, 2021; Toan, 2025) and echoes Morton's (2025) finding that engaging PD depends on genuine teacher voice and choice: gathering teachers' needs through a systematic process does not, by itself, guarantee that the resulting PD actually addresses those needs.

2.2.3. Teacher participation is shaped by voluntary engagement, role-based expectations, and material incentives

The third theme establishes that teacher participation is voluntary in principle yet powerfully shaped in practice. Participation is consistently framed as optional: "teachers are encouraged to participate, not required" (L1); "Completely voluntary, based on personal passion and career orientation" (T5), yet reinforced through certification thresholds and salary-linked incentives: "teachers who attend about two-thirds of the activities receive a certificate" (M1), and "active participation is also noted and considered in the salary raise process" (M3). The salary-scale decision writes PD attendance into graded promotion criteria, and the CoP attendance log tallies session counts, moving this linkage from perception to institutional fact. Participation is nevertheless unevenly distributed because of time, mobility, relevance, and motivational barriers: the 11a.m.–1p.m. slot "does not overlap with teaching but overlaps with the rest break, so many teachers lack energy" (C1), commuting distance discourages attendance (M3), content in CPD is not always relevant for the children's team (M3), and experienced staff "think they already know all that content" (M3); conversely, collegial connection and practical relevance sustain engagement (T1). Participation expectations are also differentiated by role, division, and employment type: mentoring is a precondition of practice for new teachers (M2), and attendance is effectively obligatory for full-time staff (T2).

The barriers identified such as time, workload, mobility, and content mismatch recur across the Vietnamese literature (Dau, 2020; Duy, 2025; Nghi, 2025; Nguyen et al., 2023) and the international literature (Azaza et al., 2023; Sadeghi & Richards, 2021). This study refines the common voluntary/mandatory binary into a more nuanced model: participation at the center is neither freely chosen nor compelled, but is graduated by career stage, division, and employment type and reinforced by a documented salary-and-rank policy that ties attendance to promotion criteria. Evaluated through andragogy, this arrangement is genuinely ambivalent. On one hand, because private-center teachers already carry heavy teaching loads that leave little time for additional activities, tying PD to a tangible reward gives them a concrete reason to take part and thereby secures a baseline level of engagement. On the other, relying on certificates and salary-linked incentives is precisely the kind of extrinsic motivation that Knowles et al. (2014) warned can produce compliance without commitment. The most telling counter-evidence

comes from teachers who continued to attend for intrinsic reasons, including collegial connection and practical relevance, suggesting that the programs sustaining the deepest engagement are those that satisfy internal motivators rather than extrinsic ones. The experienced-teacher confidence in existing teaching practices is, in andragogical terms, a failure of the need-to-know condition: senior teachers do not perceive a gap worth closing. The findings suggest that institutional incentives effectively encourage teachers to attend PD activities; however, they do not necessarily foster meaningful engagement. Teachers' willingness to participate actively and apply what they learned depends largely on whether the PD content is perceived as relevant to their teaching needs. Consequently, while the graduated PD model successfully ensures attendance, its impact on learning is more limited when teachers perceive the training as less relevant to their classroom practice.

2.2.4. PD implementation is supported by resources and feedback mechanisms, but formal evaluation remains limited

The final theme reveals a marked asymmetry: PD implementation is strongly resourced and actively monitored, yet weakly evaluated in terms of outcomes. Resourcing is a relative strength: handouts are consistently prepared and redistributed after sessions (C1; L1; T1), the center maintains "a truly enormous source of materials, including prepared handouts and sample PowerPoint slides for each level" (M3), and facilities are adequate for group sessions and one-on-one mentoring (T5). Monitoring is multi-channel but concentrated on process and participation rather than measured outcomes: every teacher is observed at least twice a year (M1), mentoring is evaluated against defined criteria (M2), and post-observation feedback follows a dialogic routine in which "the teacher self-evaluates, the observer gives feedback, and the two sides agree on points to improve" (C1). Yet the center lacks any formal mechanism to measure learning transfer or student impact, and this gap is openly acknowledged by insiders: there is "no separate evaluation scale for teachers applying CoP content into the classroom" (L1), "there has not been a very clear mechanism to measure the degree of application" (C1), and the impact on students is not measured at all: "I cannot directly evaluate the impact of these PD activities on students' learning outcomes" (L1). The needs-analysis survey corroborates this, assessing application only through self-report categories with no transfer rubric, revealing a self-aware evaluation gap rather than a hidden deficiency.

The resourcing strength distinguishes this center from settings where inadequate facilities and limited support undermined PD (Duy, 2025; Nghi, 2025; Nguyen et al., 2023). The evaluation gap, however, aligns with Guskey's (2000, 2002) long-standing argument that PD evaluation rarely reaches the levels of demonstrated transfer and student outcomes, and with the critique that PD research seldom examines whether teachers actually carry learning into practice (Chien, 2024; Rombaoa Tanaka et al., 2020; Zimmer & Matthews, 2022). What makes this finding analytically distinctive is not the existence of an evaluation gap but its self-aware, insider acknowledgment: multiple participants, including the leader, candidly conceded that no rubric measures classroom transfer and that PD's impact on students is not assessed at all, while signaling an intention to address this. Read through the lens of andragogy, the monitoring that does take place pairs classroom observation with developmental, dialogic feedback, which respects teachers' self-concept by supporting them rather than judging them, which is a strength. But the absence of any transfer measure means the center cannot confirm whether its considerable investment reaches learners, leaving the readiness-to-apply condition unverified. This gap is analytically pivotal rather than incidental: the very mechanism that would document transfer, systematic observation tied to a purpose-built rubric, is precisely the one the center has not yet constructed, so any claim about PD's downstream impact must currently rest on teacher self-report rather than observed enactment. The center's greatest strength and its most significant limitation stem from the same underlying feature: a PD system that is well developed for delivering and monitoring training activities but not yet for systematically evaluating their outcomes.

III. CONCLUSION

This study examined how PD programs are implemented to support EFL teachers' learning at a private English language center in the Mekong Delta. The findings portray a multi-

tier PD ecosystem in which multiple formats operate concurrently across center-wide and team-based levels, extended by individualized pathways spanning the full career arc; provision is designed through structured but context-sensitive processes marked by a needs-analysis tension between systematic data collection and limited teacher initiative; participation is sustained through a graduated, incentive-shaped model rather than a simple voluntary/mandatory binary; and implementation is strongly resourced and actively monitored yet weakly evaluated in terms of classroom transfer. Across all four themes, andragogy proves a productive lens: the center succeeds where it draws on teachers' experience, differentiates by career stage, and respects their self-concept, and falls short where extrinsic incentives substitute for the need to know and where readiness to apply learning is neither verified nor evaluated.

Several implications follow. Centers should pair systematic needs analysis with mechanisms that actively cultivate teacher initiative, such as rotating teacher-led sessions or co-designed agendas; incentive systems should be balanced with strategies targeting intrinsic motivation, particularly differentiated advanced strands for experienced teachers; and the observation infrastructure already in place could be extended into a simple transfer rubric, closing the loop between PD input and classroom enactment. As a single-case study of one information-rich private center, its findings are analytically rather than statistically generalizable to other settings. The evidence base is also confined to interview and documentary data, without direct classroom observation to verify how PD translates into practice, a gap that mirrors the very transfer-evaluation limitation identified in the center itself. Future research could compare PD architectures across multiple private centers, incorporate longitudinal classroom observation, and examine how PD structures relate to student learning outcomes.

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