

# ELT



## Ireland bulletin

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# Effective Teacher Professional Development for Educational Institutions in the Private Sector.

by Le Dinh Bao Quoc

## Introduction

There is a strong consensus in the body of literature that professional development (PD) plays an indispensable role in improving the quality of teaching in any school. In reality, educational institutions are paying more and more attention to develop their PD program for the teaching staff, especially during the time of the COVID-19, when most teachers have been facing the sudden change in their professional career.

However, most studies in the literature are conducted in the settings of public K-12 schools (schools from kindergarten to grade 12) and universities but not at specific private extra-curriculum English centers, which have different features compared with public schools or universities. In this article, “private extra-curriculum English centers” are defined as the English language schools in non-English speaking countries like Vietnam, offering after-school English classes.

With their distinctive characteristics and context (described in the next section), schools in this segment find it challenging to develop their own PD program with appropriate forms and delivery modes to suit their teachers, most of whom are inexperienced and have relatively low commitment. Therefore, a case study has been conducted so that a strong, sustainable, and compatible PD framework can be specifically designed for the newly-recruited expat teachers of this distinctive type of school.

## The context

The school where the case study was conducted (hereafter referred to as the School), shares the same characteristics as other educational institutions in this sector. First of all, it is a business, and therefore, typically and differently operated. The school offers evening and weekend English courses for students of all ages. In terms of academic matters, it has developed its own curriculum and teaching quality system, based on the internationally standardized language framework Common European Framework Reference (CEFR).

In terms of teachers, to meet the market-increasing demand, the School hires expat teachers who have different experiences in teaching English. These teachers work part time and earn by teaching hours. Therefore, they usually work for different schools to make the most use of their availability. Some even teach at private K-12 schools during the day and at English centers in the evenings or weekends. This leads to their low commitment to the School and to the PD activities it provides. In addition, this low commitment results in the high turnover rate, continuous recruitment, and training for new teachers.

Therefore, an effective and specialized PD program, if successfully designed and implemented, will be beneficial not only to the School but also other institutions of this type. They will be provided with guidelines on what should be emphasized when designing PD for their teachers such as what to be included, strengthened, and avoided when conducting the program.

## The case study

The case study was conducted as an endeavor to measure the newly-recruited teachers' PD needs and preferences and identify the framework for an effective PD program for these teachers at a private extra-curriculum English center.

This research included 40 newly-recruited part-time expat teachers, who had been onboard for 2 months at different campuses of the School. They answered a questionnaire about their PD needs and preferences, and then 25 of them participated in the proposed PD program specially designed for them. In addition to these teachers, 15 mentors were also invited to join the research. They were the School Academic Managers, who were experts in ELT and in charge of the teaching and learning quality of different campuses. In this research, these mentors supported the teachers during the PD and then assessed the feasibility and effectiveness of the PD program after it had been conducted in their campuses.

In order to conduct a thorough study with high level of reliability and validity, this research was designed based on the “research onion” suggested by Saunders et al. (2007) and adopted a variety of research strategies and mixed methods of data collection, using both quantitative and qualitative data. This allowed the researcher to reach significant insights that could have been missed or skipped if only one of the methods had been utilized and achieve a well-rounded understanding of the facts involved.

**“ Schools in this segment find it challenging to develop their own PD program with appropriate forms and delivery models to suit their teachers. ”**

### Teachers' PD needs and preferences

Most studies on teacher PD agree that effective programs start with PD needs analysis of both teachers' and the schools' sides. Consequently, this was the first step in this case study. Indeed, it was crucial to understand these low-commitment part-time teachers' PD needs to ensure the proposed program satisfies them. Forty teachers were asked to complete a questionnaire about their PD needs and preferences. Below are some highlighted results.

Most teachers (76.5%) were self-encouraged to improve professionally. They were willing to participate in PD activities like attending workshops or webinars, observing classes, and joining mentoring sessions.

The top 5 areas of development they expressed interest in were:

- Teaching activities and games,
- Techniques for teaching online,
- *Teaching techniques* (such as giving instructions, engaging students, etc.)
- Using teaching aids and technology in class, and
- Dealing with learners' cultural aspects.

This result reflected the situation well. Most of them were new teachers so they were in need of practical training (compared with theoretical topics). Online teaching, which has been in need during the COVID-19 pandemic, was not taught during their TEFL training courses. The last one about learners' culture would help them solve issues when they teach learners from a culture they were not yet familiar with, Vietnamese culture.

Besides the contents, the teachers' top 3 favored types of PD activity were peer-observations, workshops or webinars, and video-based training (video-taped instructions with self-corrected quizzes). These activities were expected to take no more than 3 sessions per week (30-45 minutes/ session) and done both online and offline in a self-paced manner. These preferences reflected their busy teaching schedules for different schools.

In addition to those highlighted above, the teachers suggested some enablers and barriers to their PD. Enablers included constructive feedback, incentives, and reflection opportunities. On the other hand, what they considered barriers were their busy schedules, limited communication, and lack of bonus.

### The proposed PD program

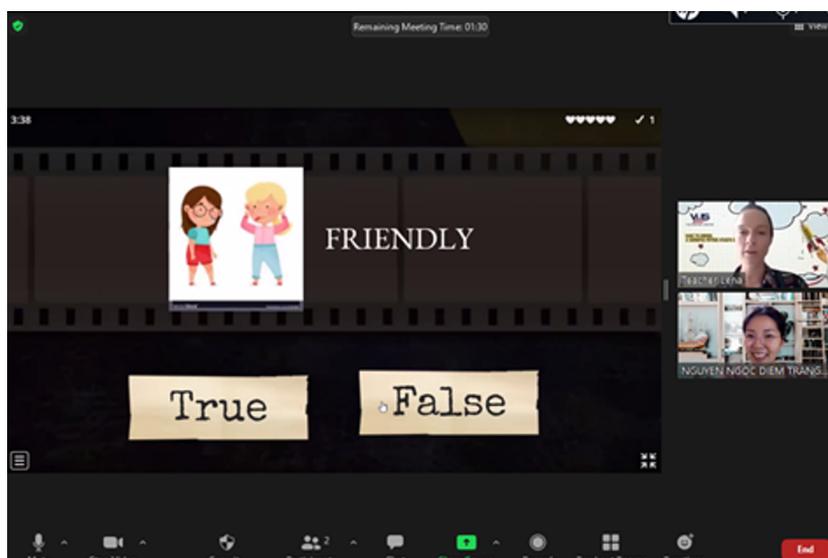
Besides the teachers' needs and preferences, it was important for the School to know what its teachers really needed in their authentic classrooms. Therefore, observations were conducted, and the observer took notes of the teachers' areas for improvements based on the School academic requirements. The data collected from the observations proved the gaps between their teaching practices and what was expected by the School.

Based on the teachers' PD needs and preferences, together with the observation data, a PD program for these teachers was designed. This program balanced the needs of both the teachers and the School, instead of focusing on only one side and neglecting the other. Below are some brief descriptions of the PD program used in this study.

- *The design:* The whole program was 6 weeks long with 3 sessions per week. The first two sessions were video lessons where teachers self-learned two topics and planned for their application of the learned knowledge in their real-life classes. The last one was a mentoring session with the mentor where they discussed the teachers' reflection after application.
- *The duration and scheduling:* Teachers would spend 15 hours in total (without pay) to complete the PD program. There was a mixed schedule, combining the flexible time for the teachers to self-learn the video lessons and the fixed time for the mentoring sessions. Each session was 45 minutes.
- *The contents:* The program included 11 video topics compatible with the teachers' and the School's needs. See the list of topics below.
  1. Building rapport with students
  2. Class closure activities
  3. Classroom management
  4. Cultural traits of Vietnamese learners
  5. Maximizing the use of English in class
  6. Online teaching techniques
  7. Planning a lesson
  8. Teaching listening
  9. Teaching reading
  10. Teaching speaking
  11. Teaching vocabulary

\* Week 1 had only 1 video session to give time for the induction session, introducing the program to the teachers.

- *The PD activity types:* In addition to the video and mentoring sessions, there were 2 peer-observations and 2 campus-based workshops for these teachers. These added a variety of PD activities to the whole program.
- *The expected achievements:* Teachers who completed the PD program successfully would pass the probation, be awarded the certificate of completion, and be assigned more teaching hours.



1:1 mentoring session conducted via Zoom

Pic by Author

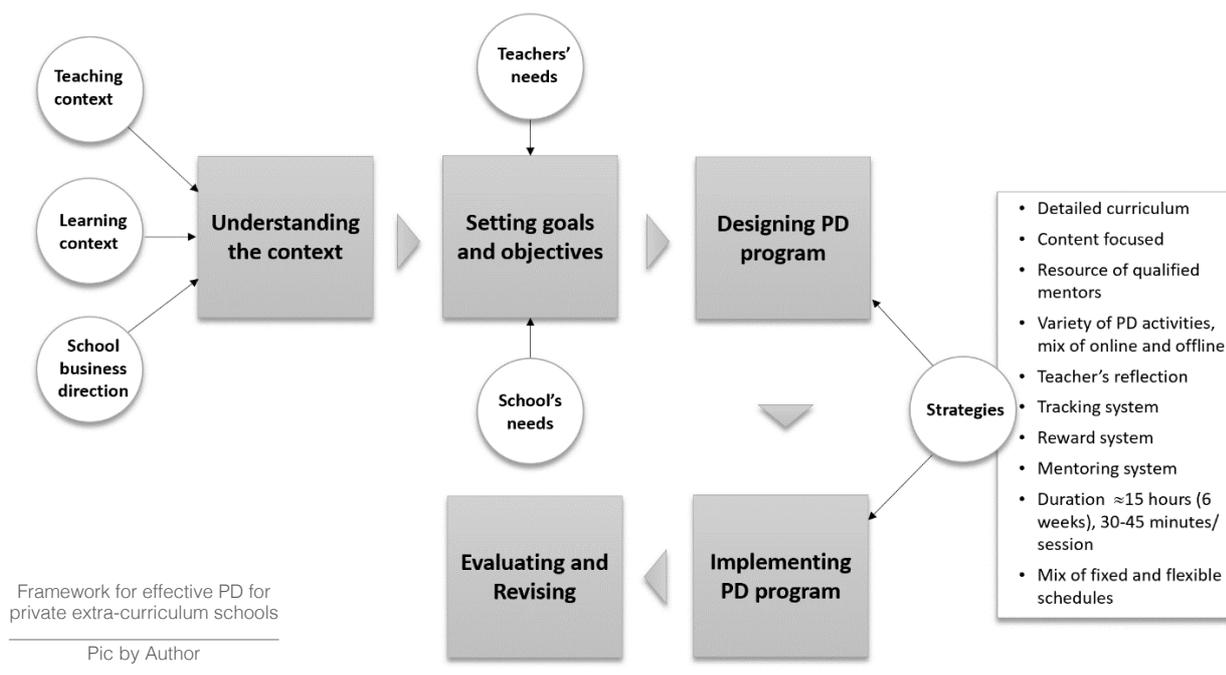
### The study's highlighted findings

Out of 25 teachers participated in the PD program, two of them did not complete it successfully due to other commitments. The rest of the teachers demonstrated improvement in their teaching practices after completion. This result was proven by the average positive 7.4% difference between the observation scores before and after the program. Moreover, the teachers' records of their reflection during the program illustrated how effectively the teachers applied what they learned in their real classes.

Another factor that proves the effectiveness of this PD program was its operational feasibility when operated. All the mentors agreed that the program was well organized, efficient, and compatible with the newly-recruited expat teachers' needs and the campus context.

### Framework for effective teacher PD for private extra-curriculum schools

Based on the findings of the study, a framework for effective PD for private extra-curriculum schools was suggested.



The framework illustrates five main stages for designing and implementing an effective PD program.

1. **Understanding the context** in which the program takes place. The PD designer should look into the teaching context (teachers, curriculum, program, etc.), the learning context (students, learning objectives, motivations, etc.), and the school business direction (what are the school business goals and how it expects the goals to be achieved).
2. **Setting the goals and objectives** for the PD program, based on intensive needs analysis of both sides, teachers and the school.
3. **Designing PD program.** In this stage, the designer must focus on the specific strategies for this unique type of school.
  - The program must be detailed and content focused, consisting of elements from teachers' real-life classroom, not theories or something detached from the teachers' context.
  - A variety of PD activities must be utilized and conducted in both offline and online delivery modes.
  - There must be a tracking system, together with effective mentoring and monitoring provided by qualified mentors, to encourage the teachers' reflection on how they effectively apply what they learned. Figure 2 shows a sample of the tracking system on the teacher's reflection.
  - There should be a reward system to motivate the teachers to participate in the program.
  - The program must be as short as possible with a mix of fixed and flexible schedules to better suit the teachers' schedule.
4. **Implementing PD program.** During this stage, the program will be conducted with the strategies planned in the previous stage.
5. **Evaluating and Revising.** PD results will be evaluated if they meet the goals set from the beginning. However, evaluation is not just looking at the teachers' results after the PD, but it should be looked from different perspectives from simple to more complex, according to Guskey (2000, p. 82), which are participants' use of new knowledge and skills, organizational support and change, and student learning outcomes.

### Conclusion

Effective PD for extra-curriculum schools in the private sector has increasingly been needed, especially in the context of non-English speaking countries. Teachers at these schools have their unique characteristics compared with those teaching at public schools or universities. Therefore, the proposed framework for effective PD in this article will contribute greatly to the current literature, helping PD designers from these schools to construct an effective contextualized PD program for their teachers.

### References:

- Guskey, T. R. (2000). *Evaluating professional development*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press
- Saunders, M., Lewis, P., & Thornhill, A. (2007). *Research methods for business students (4<sup>th</sup> ed.)*. Essex: Pearson Education Limited

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