

Factors Hindering Professional Competency Development of Senior High School EFL Teachers in the Covid-19 Era

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Abstract

The development of teacher professional competency (TPC) is the key component of teacher development and student outcomes. This study aimed to unveil the factors hindering TPC development of senior high school English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers in the pandemic. To this end, this study conducted a questionnaire survey consisting of three aspects: the level of government, the level of school and the individual level. The data were collected by administering a questionnaire to senior high school EFL teachers in Huaibei city, China. The responses of 67 participants were analyzed quantitatively regarding gender, years of teaching experience, job titles and educational background. The results indicated the main hindering factors including no enough policy support and imbalance in the government level, heavy workload, low salary and lack of scientific and reasonable in-service training system in the school level and unsound knowledge structure, unwillingness to engage in educational research, much pressure from life and lack of expert guidance in the individual level. Among them the lack of enough policy support from education authorities, poor working facilities and regulations, and low salary are the key barriers from three aspects respectively. Differences in terms of demographic variables were also discussed. The findings shed light on the multiple barriers and provided insights for why secondary school EFL teachers have not acquired a high level of professional competencies in some fields. Furthermore, the need for focusing on policy or strategies for the TPC development for EFL teachers is underlined.

keywords: EFL, Teacher, Professional Competency, Teacher Development, Covid-19

Introduction

In the theory of teacher professional performance, TPC is regarded as the major influential factor and the new role of TPC has necessitated far-reaching changes in teacher in-service education, with EFL teachers of senior high schools being no exception in China. Undoubtedly, to improve students' learning outcomes senior high school EFL teachers have to master professional competencies of all kinds such as test construction competency, pedagogical competency and assessment competency, etc. Several research studies (Enever, 2014;

Karavas, 2014; Yang, 2015; Yumru, 2015) have revealed that the lack of qualified TPC is one of the major factors that impede the effectiveness of teaching English to English learners. However, the TPCs of senior high school EFL teachers in some areas are, on average, at the fair level (Fan, 2018; Jiang, 2019; Quan, 2019). For example, their self-perceived competency to teach vocabulary is the highest and but one to teach reading to struggling students is the lowest (Zhao et al., 2016). In response to the unsatisfactory TPC status, many researchers also put forward some suggestions or strategies aiming to address the problem discussed beforehand. Some researchers suggested training programs (Bastos & Araújo e Sá, 2015) or kinds of professional development (PD) activities (Valmori & De Costa, 2016), in which peer-coaching is considered as the way of enhancing pedagogical competency (Tarwiyah et al., 2018), for example. Furthermore, research findings of Irmawati, Widiati, and Cahyono (2017) showed some PD activities often adopted by EFL teachers cover discussion with colleagues, teacher association forum, seminars and workshops, training courses, educational research, relevant net and reading sources and team teaching. That is because the successful secret of these activities working well is doing reflection, taking and giving feedback, discussing, broadening knowledge, researching, and problem solving. Surprisingly, although continuous PD activities or training programs were perceived by EFL teachers as creative, critical and helpful learning activities (Asmari, 2016), these were rarely available to teachers to improve their TPC in-service education.

Given the fact that the level of some TPCs of senior high EFL teachers is not high and that suggestions or strategies have not worked well on EFL teachers, some researchers have theoretically explored hindering factors in terms of training arrangement (Kosgei, 2015), qualities of training teacher educators (Zein, 2016), government policy (Nhan, 2018), work motivation (Boset et al., 2017; Daniels, 2017; Tambunan et al., 2018), students' various learning needs (Goodwin, 2018; Nghia, 2015), personal factors and environmental factors (students, school location and facilities, colleagues, school leadership and opportunities for continuous professional development) (Amin, 2015b) and large class sizes and parents' negative attitudes toward communicative language teaching (Huang & Yang, 2018). Despite the progress discussed above, few studies above have yielded the hindering factors in a systematic and comprehensive way. The problem I have referred to falls within in the field of senior high school EFL teachers from Huaibei city where most teachers have received some formal and informal professional trainings in the past years but some of their TPCs are unsatisfactory. Hence, this study here aims to unveil the hindering factors regarding the government level, school level and personal level, more details discussed based on gender, years of teaching experience, job titles and educational background in an empirical way. Indeed, TPC has become the focus of teaching reform of senior high schools in China. As such, the key contribution of this work is to highlight the constraints from three aspects which will offer implications on strategies for TPC development of senior high school EFL teachers.

Literature Review

Professional Competency of Senior High School EFL Teachers

As for TPC definitions, many researchers agreed on the broad categories consisting of knowledge, skills and attitudes (Katane & Selvi, 2006; Mone, 2017; Young, 1998). In China English is taught as a foreign language different from the secondary language teaching. Ministry of Education (2012) in China reported Standards for Middle School Teachers (Trial) which stated three constructs of improving PD such as professional idea and ethics,

professional knowledge and professional competency. Accordingly, teachers need to master professional knowledge and related basic skills to present an effective English learning environment via improving TPCs discussed above. After reviewing five years (2015-2019) of researches in the Chinese context, findings showed that prior researches show great concerns on senior high school EFL TPCs in view of instruction, linguistics, reflection, educational research, intercultural communication, curriculum development, and computer information technology (He, 2017; Jiang, 2019; Liang, 2019; Liu, 2018; Quan, 2019; Tan, 2017; Wang, 2017; Yang, 2015; Zhao, 2017). There is no denying that EFL teachers still have deficiencies in professional knowledge and skills in real English teaching practice. For instance, teachers who were adequately trained for assessment reported themselves to have a low level of assessment literacy (Muhammad & Bardakçı, 2019). Next, the lack of theoretical understanding exists among many EFL teachers regarding the intercultural approach in English language teaching contexts and its objectives, which is likely to influence negatively on their intercultural teaching practices (Bousslama & Benaissi, 2018). And Ardiç and Çiftçi (2019) claimed that EFL teachers' perceived information and communication technology (ICT) competency was low in the seven major areas. In terms of intercultural communicative competence (ICC) of EFL teachers, they haven't owned a well-built episodic and relational system due to the lack of the experience of varying intercultural contexts, and the simpleness of the interpersonal relations with foreigners (Zhang, 2017).

Studies Investigating the Constraints Preventing Professional Competency Development of Senior High School EFL Teachers

Factors impeding successful teaching career and TPC development of senior high school EFL teachers are discussed in many researches. Marcellino (2015) stated the success of English teaching in Indonesia depends on the students' cultural background, values, customs and beliefs. Besides the student factor, there are other factors such as teachers' beliefs about creativity (Bereczki & Karpati, 2018), for example. Amin (2015a) concluded factors significantly affecting and shaping English TPCs include personal factors and environmental factors. Among them, commitment and opportunities for continuous TPC development are two contributing factors. Another major barriers blocking teachers' growth are one-sided cognition of TPC development, a ungrounded leadership, traditional managerial approach of implementation, diversities of professional needs and heavy workload (Gemedda, Fiorucci, & Catarci, 2014). Sulistiyo (2016) explained that low English proficiency, classroom size, students' motivation, and limited sources of learning, inadequate funds and low wages are also factors hindering EFL teaching and learning success.

Some researchers explored the hindering factors from internal and external perspectives (Guo, 2017; Li, 2012; Ma, 2016; Sun & Xu, 2020). Hindering factors are also explored by other researchers from internal and external perspectives. Based on a meta-analysis of domestic dissertations and published papers in core journals of five years between 2015 and 2019, Sun and Xu (2020) recommended the causes of low TPCs of secondary school EFL teachers are the lack of independent development awareness internally and the imperfect teacher training mechanism externally. The latter is reflected in the few opportunities to participate in professional trainings, and the separation between theory and practice of training content. However, many EFL teachers, who attended in-service trainings or programs, haven't got high TPCs. This is an interesting educational phenomenon to explore. In terms of external obstacles, heavy teaching tasks, less learning time, unsolid school-based teaching research,

neglect of teacher professional development, less support from educational administrative departments including education funds, teaching environment and learning resources have received much considerable attention in the educational field (Fan, 2018; Liu, 2018; Y. Wang & Zhang, 2015). Janchiv and Kang (2018) suggested teachers' unsatisfactory attitudes towards professional activities due to singleness of training, unable meeting their needs. Regarding opportunities and training programs as the main channel for in-service teachers, many factors limit EFL teacher participation such as poor organization of the training programs, inadequacy of inset programs in meeting expectations, lack of information inset courses, poor relationship with supervisors and lack of qualified trainers (Kosgei, 2015). And the study conducted by Spratt (2019) revealed that participants' perceived most salient obstacles preventing collaborative reflection in their TPC development were lack of time for planning and large-scale hierarchical mandates being considered to be negative to TPC development (Bill & Foundation, 2014; Panggua et al., 2018). That may be due to the top-down mode of teacher development taking place in a one-shot workshop and failing to enable teachers to reflect and regulate their professional behavior (Agbayahoun, 2016). Concerning external causes, the lack of self-development awareness and crisis awareness and life-long learning concept and weak educational and teaching beliefs are two ones (Tan, 2017; Yang, 2015). One of example is mainly reflected in teachers' professional reflection where the fewer times they reflect on their teaching, the older the teachers are. Moreover, both male and female high school English teachers with master degree often reflect on their teaching and have a strong sense of reflection (Li, 2015; Zhang & Feng, 2017). The researches above did achieve but not much study has been done in an empirical way in the Chinese context. Therefore, this study aims to explore senior school EFL teachers' views about factors preventing their TPC development in the Chinese context. Accordingly, the research question in this study is: What are the factors hindering PC development of senior school EFL teachers? The question informed the design of the survey research.

Method

Research Design

This study employed a quantitative approach to explore factors hindering TPC development of secondary school EFL teachers. Considering convenience and efficiency of obtaining information, questionnaires were administered to senior high school EFL teachers who come from Huaibei city, where there are around 390 senior high school EFL teachers. Questionnaires were distributed through software QQ with the purpose of gaining the data from more than 60 samples.

Participants

A random sampling technique was employed to determine the sample of this study. The sample of this study was 67 EFL teachers, including only 12 male teachers and 55 female ones derived from 8 senior high schools. **Table 1** shows the demographic information of participant teachers.

Table 1

Demographics of the participants in the study (N=67)

Variables	Category	Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Male	12	17.90%
	Female	55	82.10%
Years of teaching experience	1-5years	4	6%
	6 -15 years	33	49.30%
	16-25 years	24	35.80%
	Above 26 years	6	9%
Job titles	Junior	13	19.40%
	Intermediate	38	56.70%
Educational background	Vice-senior	16	23.90%
	Graduate	61	91%
	Postgraduate	6	9%

Instruments

A questionnaire is a valid data collection instrument consisting of a series of questions asking individuals to gather useful information about a given topic (Roopa & Rani, 2012). The self-constructed questionnaire has two sections, the first one of which (questions from NO. one to five) is to obtain ethnographical information including gender, years of teaching experience, position and educational background. In the second section, questions from NO. six to eight are identified to explore hindering factors from three aspects: government, schools and individuals.

Data Collection and Analysis

The data gathered from these questions were analyzed quantitatively using SPSS statistical software 25 to calculate the means based on their level of agreement. Participant teachers chose three of these problems in order of degree, which they met with in the process of developing their professional competencies, so there is no need to test the validity and the internal consistency of the items through Cronbach's Alpha.

Findings and Discussion

This paper focuses on the question what factors hindering the development of EFL teachers of senior high schools are. In order to answer the question, the researcher asked participants to finish partial sequencing questions from three dimensions: the level of government, the level of school and the individual level. EFL teachers were allowed to choose only three of all the items and sequenced them based on the order of degree, assigned with 10 points, 5 points and 2 points from high to low. Five choices totally regarding the level of government are listed below.

The Level of Government

- a. *Insufficient policy support*
- b. *Insufficient fund input into schooling*
- c. *Imbalance of concerns and policy support among schools*
- d. *Too much expectation on teachers*
- e. *Others*

Table 2 shows that no enough policy support from education authorities stands in the first place for all EFL teachers investigated. Uneven support and concerns from educational authorities rank in the second place. This similar finding is echoed in the study conducted by Fan (2018). Last but not least, all participant teachers feel high expectations and requirements from society.

Table 2

The overview of the total average in the level of government (M=Mean)

Indicators	a	b	c	d	e
M	5.74	4.96	5.54	5.15	4.33
N	54	54	52	48	6

Data in **table 3** gives information about EFL teachers' views on obstacles based on four variables. From it, we can know that there is a statistically significant difference in gender, years of teaching experience, job title and educational background. Male teachers think insufficient policy is the first factor while female teachers find its imbalance among schools plays a crucial role in developing TPCs. Teachers with 1-5 years and 16-25 years consider too much expectation on them to be the biggest obstacle. Imbalance of concerns and policy support among schools are the biggest barrier for teachers with 16-25 years and above 26 years. Furthermore, insufficient policy support is the primary barrier with insufficient fund input and too much expectation on teachers being the second and third one among junior teachers. For intermediate teachers, imbalance of emphasis among schools is the primary reason while vice-senior teachers feel too much expectation on teachers to be the primary reason. And there is no significant difference in the government level among teachers of different academic certificates.

Table 3

The average value of four variables in the government of level

Variables		a	b	c	d	e
Gender	Male	6.33	4.42	4.82	4.88	2.00
	Female	5.62	5.12	5.73	5.20	4.80
Years of teaching experience	1-5 years	5.67	5.00	1.33	8.00	0
	6-15 years	6.07	5.45	5.46	3.92	2.00
	16-25 years	5.29	4.22	5.65	6.56	4.80
	Above 26 years	5.40	4.75	8.00	4.00	0
Job title	Junior	6.27	5.36	3.80	5.00	0
	Intermediate	5.57	5.26	6.03	4.27	4.80
	Vice-senior	5.69	3.83	5.75	7.36	2.00
Educational background	Graduate	5.76	4.94	5.55	5.11	4.33
	Postgraduate	5.50	5.17	5.40	5.50	0

The Level of School

a. Close campus culture and lack of teamwork

b. Examination-oriented evaluation system and unreasonable incentive mechanism

c. The imperfect in-service training system such as lack of pertinence of the training content and lack of opportunities of external study

d. High teaching pressure caused by the orientation of College Entrance Examination

e. Heavy workload

f. Low salary

g. Lack of good language learning environment and teaching resources

h. Formalization of school-based teaching and research

i. Poor working conditions

j. Gender imbalance among teachers

k. Weak English foundation of students

From Table 4, we can know the most influential factors in the first three places are poor working conditions, low salary, followed by weak English proficiency of students. These findings are almost conformable with that of the study of Guo (2017). That means working conditions of teachers need to be improved and salaries increased, too. Then teachers complained that most students' current English proficiency is too low to teach well in a short period, which is in line with that of the study of Marcellino (2015).

Table 4

The overview of the total average in the level of school

Indicators	a	b	c	d	e	f	g	h	i	j	k
M	2.29	2.91	4.06	3.19	4.00	4.40	3.18	2.92	3.00	4.80	4.21
N	14	33	36	36	38	42	38	26	5	5	42

As listed in **Table 5**, we can see that low salary, lack of good language learning environment and teaching resources are the chief cause for male teachers. Female teachers, however, consider gender imbalance among teachers is the hardest problem because of a big majority of EFL teachers being female in schools, which is a noticeable situation worthy to be studied in China. In terms of years of teaching experience, heavy workload is the serious factor preventing young teachers of below 5 years from TPC development while gender imbalance among teachers is the key factor among teachers of 16-25 years. As for teachers between 6-15 years and above 26 years, there is no sharp perception at the school level. As for job titles, the imperfect in-service training system such as lack of pertinence of the training content and lack of opportunities of external study, heavy workload and low salary are the first three impeding factors for junior EFL teachers while low salary, weak English foundation of students, poor working conditions and gender imbalance among teachers for vice-senior EFL teachers. For intermediate EFL teachers, there is a sharp cause with gender imbalance among teachers of 7.5 points. Comparing the data among teachers from different educational backgrounds, it can be seen that there is no evident difference although teachers with postgraduate degree consider heavy workload, and low salary are the main cause. That may be because young teachers account for most postgraduate teachers.

Table 5

The average value of four variables in the level of school

Variables		a	b	c	d	e	f	g	h	i	j	k
Gender	Male	0	1.29	1.67	2.33	4.25	6.71	4.63	4.00	0	4.00	4.25
	Female	2.67	3.35	4.53	3.37	3.97	3.94	2.80	2.60	3.75	6.00	4.21
Years of teaching experience	1-5 years	0	0	2.00	6.00	10	4.00	5.00	0	0	2.00	5.00
	6 -15years	1.5	2.56	4.22	3.47	4	4.52	2.65	2.59	1.67	3.50	2.68
	16 -25 years	3.33	3.58	3.79	3.00	4.25	4.00	4.00	5.00	5.00	7.50	4.44
	Above 26 years	0	2.33	5.00	0.67	1.33	5.67	1.67	2.33	5.00	0	10
Job title	Junior	0.67	2.50	5.67	2.83	5.00	4.57	3.70	3.40	0	2.00	3.67
	Intermediate	3.33	3.24	3.86	3.35	3.30	3.96	2.50	2.13	2.50	7.50	3.83
	Vice-senior	0	2.25	3.38	3.00	5.13	6.00	4.25	4.50	5.00	5.00	5.78
Educational background	Graduate	2.46	3.10	4.03	3.18	3.63	4.16	3.03	2.96	3.75	4.80	4.13
	Postgraduate	0	1.50	5.00	3.50	8.33	6.75	5.00	2.50	0	0	6.00

The Individual Level*a. Insufficient work experience**b. Lack of enthusiasm in education and teaching**c. Backward educational concept**d. Unscientific self-assessment and Lack of a specific target and a long-term planning and clear growth goals**e. Unsound knowledge structure and low cultural literacy caused by less professional theoretical materials reading**f. Fear or unwillingness to engage in scientific activity**g. Insufficient deep reflection or less reflection**h. Single teaching method and lack of innovation**i. Great pressure on life from low salary**j. Low modern education technology**k. Unharmonious family atmosphere**l. Few academic writings**m. Low social status**n. Poor oral English**o. Lack of expert guidance**p. Others*

Table 6 presented great pressure on life from low salary and lack of expert guidance, in particular, teachers' low salary distracting themselves from improving the development of TPC on the whole.

Table 6

The overview of the total average in the individual level

Indicator	a	b	c	d	e	f	g	h	i	j	k	l	m	n	o	p
M	3.0	4.2	3.0	5.0	4.6	4.2	3.7	3.5	5.6	2.8	3.5	3.5	3.5	3.5	5.2	6.0
N	0	5	0	0	7	0	4	7	6	3	0	0	0	0	1	0
N	4	4	8	26	24	10	23	28	32	12	2	32	14	14	33	2

As shown in the table below **Table 7**, unsound knowledge structure and low cultural literacy caused by less professional theoretical materials reading and lack of expert guidance are the main hindering factors for male teachers while for female teachers there is no sharp situation

with only great pressure on life from low salary, unscientific self-assessment and lack of a specific target and lack of a long-term planning and clear growth goals and unharmonious family atmosphere.

There is no sharp cause among teachers of 6-15 years and 16-25 years. On the contrast, teachers of below 5 years and above 26 years hold the strong opinion that unsound knowledge structure and low cultural literacy caused by less professional reading and insufficient deep reflection or less reflection contribute to their low TPC development for teachers below 5 years. It is similar to the status of teachers of above 26 years. These findings also support the suggestions of the study conducted by (Q. Li, 2015) and Ying Zhang and Feng (2017). Regarding job titles, on enough deep reading, reflection or less reflection and great pressure on life from low salary are the main causes for junior teachers while lack of enthusiasm in education and teaching, and fear or unwillingness to engage in scientific activities have a negative effect on TPC development of vice-senior teachers. About educational background, hindering factors for postgraduate teachers are centralized on lack of enthusiasm in education and teaching and insufficient deep reflection or less reflection, which is a problem worthy of attention and in an urgent need of solution. For graduate teachers, problems are plain and flat.

Table 7

The average value of four variables in the individual level

Variables		a	b	c	d	e	f	g	h	i	j	k	l	m	n	o	p
Gender	Male	5.00	0	1.33	4.40	10	2.00	2.50	2.71	5.57	1.67	2.00	1.75	3.00	2.50	8.00	10
	Female	1.00	4.25	4.00	5.14	4.43	4.44	4.18	3.86	5.68	3.22	5.00	3.75	3.64	3.90	4.71	2.00
Years of teaching experience	1-5 years	0	0	0	5.00	10	0	10	0	5.67	0	2.00	2.00	0	0	5.00	0
	6-15 years	3.33	2.50	1.40	5.69	4.71	2.43	2.42	2.23	5.38	2.44	3.00	2.48	2.17	2.44	5.32	0
	16-25 years	0	6.00	5.67	3.63	4.50	7.50	4.63	5.64	5.60	3.50	5.00	3.83	4.80	5.40	4.60	6
	Above 26 years	2.00	0	0	6.00	0	10	5.00	3.00	7.33	5.00	0	5.00	4.00	0	7.50	0
Job title	Junior	5.00	0	0	4.50	8.00	0	5.00	0.67	7.00	3.33	2.00	2.14	2.00	3.00	6.11	0
	Intermediate	2.50	2.33	2.40	5.29	4.13	3.56	3.07	4.64	5.26	2.43	5.00	3.50	3.71	3.57	4.58	2
Educational background	Vice-senior	2.00	10	6.00	4.83	3.50	10	5.00	3.87	5.57	3.50	0	6.67	3.50	4.00	6.00	10
	Graduate	3.00	2.33	3.00	5.00	4.65	4.20	3.45	3.32	5.55	2.83	5.00	3.33	3.62	3.62	5.17	00
	Postgraduate	0	10	0	5.00	5.00	0	10	5.67	6.67	0	2.00	6.00	2.00	2.00	5.67	0

Conclusion

On the basis of the survey above, we draw the following conclusion about the factors impeding TPC development of senior high school EFL teachers in China. Our findings at least hint that senior high EFL teachers feel an urgent need to develop their TPCs and recognize the

obstacles in three levels, in which the decisive determinant is obstacles in the individual level.

The findings of the current research are shown below. First, in the government level imbalance of emphasis among schools, insufficient policy support and imbalance of emphasis among schools are the main impeding factors for all EFL teachers. In terms of years of teaching experience, a significant difference exists like insufficient policy support, and too much expectation on teachers. This may be because TPCs of novice teachers just entering the profession are still weak in all kinds of professional competencies. However, very experienced teachers are not caught in the worry as novice teachers. Second, On the school level, poor working conditions, low salary, and weak English proficiency of students are the hardest problems for all EFL teachers. Great pressure on life from low salary is the biggest problem for male EFL teachers, which is different from other prior studies of (Sun and Xu, 2020). However, female teachers do not, which may be as a result of Chinese traditional life ideas and lifestyles in which the male partner has to shoulder most of the family's income in order to keep the family functioning. It is a common phenomenon in China that teachers with a few teaching ages are also young and have a heavy teaching task in school. Furthermore, backward educational concept, heavy workload, and low salary are the main causes for postgraduate teachers. Because teachers with postgraduate certificates are mostly young and have lower professional titles, who are usually paid low salary and can not meet the needs of their children all-around development. Third, On the individual level, great pressure on life from low salary, lack of expert guidance and unscientific self-assessment and lack of a specific target and a long-term planning are the main obstacles for all EFL teachers. There is an outstanding difference between aged and young teachers embodied in unsound knowledge structure and low cultural literacy caused by less professional theoretical materials reading and insufficient deep reflection or less reflection. This is urgent for young teachers to tackle. However, fear or unwillingness to engage in scientific activities, lack of enthusiasm in education and teaching, single teaching method and lack of innovation are the hardest problems for teachers with 16-25 years. In terms of titles, vice-senior teachers consider lack of enthusiasm in education and teaching and fear or unwillingness to engage in scientific activity. Lack of enthusiasm in education and teaching and insufficient deep reflection or less reflection are the main factors for postgraduate teachers. Maybe it is because of more class hours, high pressure, low pay, no time and energy to think, read and study.

Although there are important discoveries revealed by these studies, there are also limitations. The researchers didn't construct the open-ended questionnaire or interviews to develop the formal questionnaire but only using the synthesizing of related theories and focuses of other prior studies. Of course, if follow-up qualitative interviews were conducted, we would have obtained underlying factors for the self-assessed level of TPCs of secondary school EFL teachers and tridimensional reasons behind these impeding factors. Another limitation of this study is a small sample size, which seems to reduce the reliability of research results.

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