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The government's policy on EFL teacher professional development: Opportunities and challenges for the Mekong Delta

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ABSTRACT

This paper is intended as a contribution towards understanding recent professional development in the government's policy for English as a foreign language (EFL) teachers in the Mekong Delta of Vietnam. The paper offers an account of opportunities and challenges facing EFL teachers in language proficiency training courses. A questionnaire was administered to 61 EFL teacher-as-learners from seven cities and provinces in the Mekong Delta to investigate their opportunities and challenges in improving language skills in language proficiency training courses. The results of the study show that high school EFL teachers made use of the opportunities of the Vietnamese government's policy for professional development to improve their four English language skills. However, they were challenged by the problems related to the expense and time when taking these courses.

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1 INTRODUCTION

In the era of globalization, the governments of many countries are focusing on educational reforms, which consider teacher professional development as a key factor affecting the quality of educational system (Ho *et al.*, 2014). For this reason, teacher professional development (TPD) training programs are crucial to enhance teacher professional quality (Villegas-Reimers, 2003; Richards and Farrell, 2005). Contextually, along with the implementation of Vietnam's National Foreign Language 2020 (NFL2020) Project, the Vietnamese Government has released a number of policies on English as a foreign language (EFL) teachers' professional development to foster the quality of English instruction at all levels (Truong, 2017). Among these policies, the Official Dispatch No.

792/BGDĐT/NGCBLGD dated on February 25th, 2014 (MOET, 2014b) on the English teacher competencies framework indicated clearly that high school English teachers need to obtain Level 5 in Vietnam's foreign language proficiency framework. However, officials from Vietnam's MOET and NFL2020 project reported that over 90% of high school English teachers did not meet the requirements (Dudzic and Nguyen, 2013). To improve the current situation, Vietnam's MOET promulgated the Decision on the approval of the NFL2020 project, which focused on professional development and professional development programs (Truong, 2017). From the professional development necessity and reality in Vietnam, it is essential to reflect on what have been done and what need to improve in terms of professional development training programs.

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Government's policy on EFL TPD and PD training programs

For the purposes of developing English teachers' professional competencies and increasing the quality of language teaching and learning according to the requirements of NFL2020 project, MOET has organized a great deal of workshops with the participation of both domestic and foreign experts in the field of education to establish the English teacher competencies framework which is associated with language teacher qualifications framework (MOET, 2014a). The framework includes five domains: (1) knowledge of subject and curriculum, (2) knowledge of teaching, (3) knowledge of learners, (4) attitudes and values, and (5) learning in and from practice informed by context. To meet with these requirements, the MOET implemented TPD training programs in collaboration with 10 universities and institutions in Vietnam. For teachers in the Mekong Delta, two universities responsible for the teacher training programs are Can Tho University and Ho Chi Minh University of Education from May 2017 to December 2017 (MOET, 2017). After these training programs, EFL teachers are required to reach at least 1 level higher than their current level of proficiency in Vietnam's foreign language proficiency framework. Additionally, funds for organizing these training programs come from the extra expenditure of NFL2020 project in 2016 (MOET, 2017). Consequently, these initiatives offer favorable conditions to EFL teachers in the process of professional development as the teachers have opportunities to develop their English language proficiency while spending less than usual.

2.2 Opportunities for EFL teachers in TPD and training

As the aforementioned competencies framework, the first domain of knowledge of subject and curriculum requires high school EFL teachers to be competent in the use of English at level 5 of Vietnam's foreign language proficiency framework which clearly defined requirements for competencies and capacity in listening, reading, speaking, and writing (MOET, 2014a). That is to say, in speaking, an individual language user can express him/herself fluently and spontaneously, almost effortlessly and has a good command of a broad lexical repertoire allowing gaps to be readily overcome with circumlocutions. Similarly, in writing, the user can write clear, well-structured texts of complex subjects, underline the relevant salient issues, expand and supporting points of view at

some length with subsidiary points, reasons and relevant examples, and round off with an appropriate conclusion and write to express him/herself, connect with the interlocutors effectively and flexibly. Also, in listening, the user can follow and understand extended speech even when it is not clearly structured and when relationships are only implied and not signaled explicitly. Besides, the language user can follow and understand ebullient conversations between native speakers and abstract arguments propositionally and linguistically. Moreover, the user can understand necessary factual information via social media. Finally, in reading, the user can understand a detailed lengthy, complex texts, whether or not they relate to his/her own area of specialty, provided he/she can reread difficult sections.

Fahmy and Bilton (1992) investigated teacher students' needs towards language proficiency development. They found that EFL teacher students were well-aware of their needs to improve language proficiency, so suggested for language support in the undergraduate TEFL education program. This can be considered as a need for language proficiency training programs. Wati (2011) used the descriptive approach to investigate how effectively English teacher training programs enhance EFL teachers' confidence and motivation in teaching. The results found out that teacher training programs can improve speaking ability of high school teachers. By conducting a qualitative study, Doran (2014) investigated teachers' perceptions of professional development activities in the context where the students have diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds. The research concluded that the participating teachers recognized the good qualities of the professional development activities that they participated in terms of content, teaching strategies, and interactions with learners. Besides, these teachers stressed the importance and necessity of the professional development activities for their teaching practices.

In contrast, Tawalbeh (2015) investigated teachers' perceptions of the effectiveness of the professional development programs in a university English language center in Saudi Arabia. The findings showed that EFL teachers in his study perceived negatively the professional development programs they are engaged in; thus, they did not appreciate the importance of these activities in their teaching context. To explain these issues, Tawalbeh proposed three possible reasons: the teacher participants' needs were not taken into consideration when designing the professional development activities; the teacher participants took an inactive role in the

professional development activities, and the professional development activities' trainers were not well qualified enough to instruct the teacher participants in some specific areas. Similarly, Alshu-maimeri and Almohaisen's (2017) descriptive study explored how often EFL teachers in Saudi participate in professional development programs and how they perceive the usefulness of these activities to their teaching practices. The research found that participating in language training courses were not perceived positively by the participants because of their passive role in learning and their limited time.

The studies noted above presents an overview of the teachers' perceptions of professional development programs and how they take advantage of the professional development programs to develop their language proficiency in different backgrounds. No clear consensus exists in the results of these studies because different studies show different results in relation to the teachers' language proficiency. From above-mentioned studies, the current issue of teacher training programs is in need of a thorough examination into which language features the teacher trainees achieve after the training programs because these programs have provided opportunities for EFL teachers to develop their linguistic abilities.

2.3 Challenges facing TPD and training

Some of the relevant studies on challenges facing TPD and training will be taken into this review section.

Regarding funds for teacher training, Kosgei (2015) suggested that income is one of the factors affecting teachers' interest in participating teacher training programs. Some schools do not prepare enough financial support for teachers' training, which can prevent the teachers from accessing to further learning and hinder their linguistic and professional growth. Another challenge making EFL teachers feel hindered from teacher training courses is a poor relationship between high school teachers and their managers. Maranga (1977) reported in his study that EFL teachers can take full advantages of teacher training programs if their administrators support their personal opportunities of professional development. The next possible constraint in teacher training programs is teachers' lack of interest in these courses. Kosgei (2015) proposed to carefully examine teachers' needs of training courses before implementing actual teacher training ones. In addition to teachers' lack of interest, Kosgei's (2015) study was aimed to investigate challenges that secondary school staff mem-

bers were encountering in professional development training. This study manifested four more challenges facing the school staff members, namely inadequate information on training courses and programs, time-management problems due to personal business, poor quality of organized training programs and courses, and inadequacy of eligible professional trainers or educators.

In addition, Ekşi (2010) researched factors hindering the instructors from attending professional development activities. Ekşi found that date/time issues, inessential content, and disadvantageous location are top three factors hindering the instructors from participating in professional development activities, followed by cost, trainer issues, and intense pacing. Factors attracted less attention from the participants were excessive workload, lack of institutional support, lack of information of upcoming programs, depleted self-motivation. The findings pose a different picture to those of the above studies.

In 2010, Incecay and Bakioglu investigated factors affecting teachers' professional learning. Self-devised questionnaires were employed to gather data from 482 state primary school teachers. The results indicated that quality of professional development programs, financial deficiencies, institutional support were recognized as the three most important factors to affect teachers' professional learning. Moreover, the teachers were particularly affected by school administrations and school culture. The teachers in the study thought that extrinsic motivation for professional development was not as important as intrinsic motivation because the teachers need their own development plans to follow instead of the others' plans.

To sum up, these studies have shown seven challenges that trainees face in professional development training programs: (1) funds for teacher training, (2) poor relationship between high school EFL teachers and their managers, (3) teachers' lack of interest in teacher training courses, (4) inadequate information on training courses and programs, (5) time-management problems due to personal business, (6) poor quality of organized training programs and courses, and (7) inadequacy of eligible professional trainers or educators.

3 METHODS

3.1 Design

The study was conducted as a descriptive one that follows quantitative research method to explore high school EFL teachers' opportunities and challenges in participating in language proficiency pro-

grams. Two research questions are specified as below:

- (1) What are some opportunities in improving language skills that EFL teacher-as-learners get from language proficiency training courses?
- (2) What are some challenges that EFL teacher-as-learners face in language proficiency training courses?

3.2 Participants

The sample of this study comprises 61 high school EFL teachers from seven cities and provinces of the Mekong Delta of Vietnam. This study employed convenient sampling technique to approach the available and eligible participants for the study. The participants of the study are different in terms of their backgrounds, age ranges, gender, teaching experience, and academic qualifications so that the results can yield useful information from different voices of teachers.

3.3 Instrument: The questionnaire

According to Ackroyd and Hughes (1992) and Sapsford and Jupp (2006), the questionnaire is one of the most convenient and practical research instruments that enables the researcher to collect a large amount of quantitative data quickly and cost-effectively. In this study, questionnaire was employed to collect quantitative data about opportunities and challenges of EFL teachers in language proficiency training courses. The questionnaire used the five-point Likert scale of opinion, namely (1) *strongly agree*, (2) *agree*, (3) *neutral*, (4) *disagree*, and (5) *strongly disagree*.

Table 1: Summary of items for the language skills

Language skills	Items
Listening	3, 5, 6, 8
Speaking	1
Reading	7
Writing	2, 4

The questionnaire includes two main sections. The first section comprises 8 statements of opportuni-

ties that high school EFL teachers get in language proficiency courses based on Vietnam’s foreign language proficiency framework.

The second one comprises 7 statements of challenges that high school EFL teachers face in language proficiency courses based on the literature review, i.e. funds for teacher training, poor relationship between high school EFL teachers and their managers, teachers’ lack of interest in teacher training courses, inadequate information on training courses and programs, time-management problems due to personal business, poor quality of organized training programs and courses, and inadequacy of eligible professional trainers or educators.

3.4 Data collection

The quantitative data was collected with the help of Google Form owing to its convenience in collecting data technologically. Initially, the questionnaire was designed on paper, then transferred to Google Form which is available at <https://docs.google.com/forms/u/0/> to approach eligible participants.

4 RESULTS

Simple statistical analysis was applied to the questionnaire data gathered which contains two sections. The data from the first section consisted of the items dealt with participants’ opportunities in improving language skills when participating in language proficiency training courses. The data from the second section consisted of the items dealt with participants’ challenges when participating in language proficiency training courses.

4.1 Participants’ opportunities in improving language skills when participating in language proficiency training courses

The collected data about EFL teachers’ opportunities in improving English language skills when participating in language proficiency training courses was displayed in the following sections.

4.1.1 Opportunities in improving listening skills

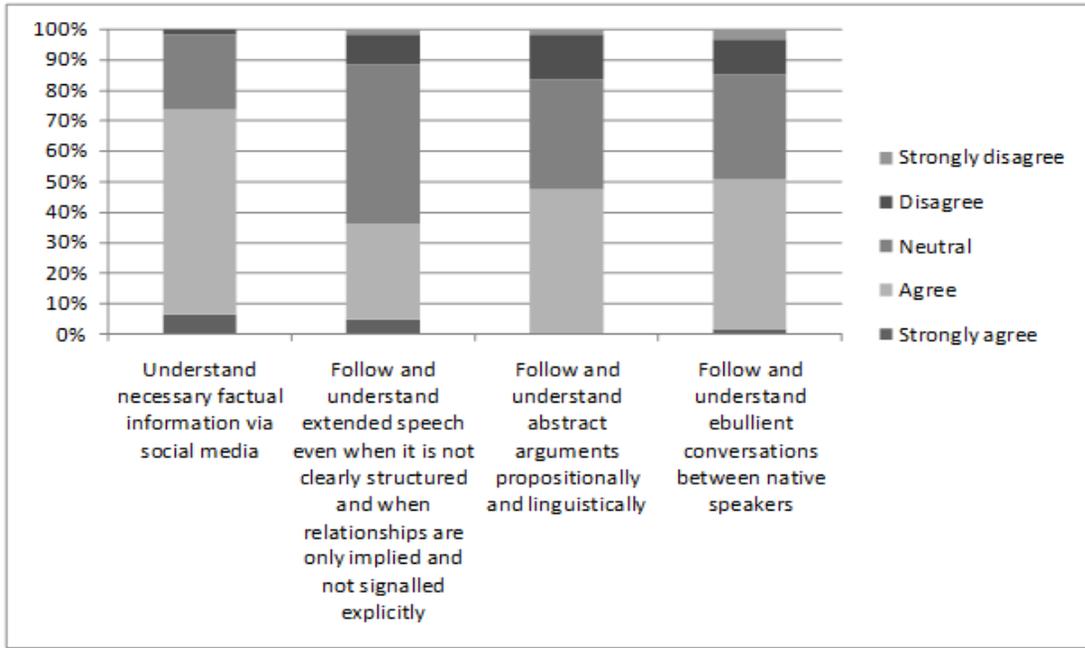


Fig. 1: Participants' opportunities in improving listening skills when participating in language proficiency training courses

Figure 1 shows the listening features that participants improved by taking the opportunities to participate in language proficiency training courses. As can be seen, the most striking feature recorded in the chart is that all of the proportions of Agree and Strongly agree in all 4 features are larger than the ones of Disagree and Strongly disagree, espe-

cially the first feature 'Understand necessary factual information via social media' with over 70%. This means the participants mainly agreed that they have improved their listening skills after taking the language proficiency training courses.

4.1.2 Opportunities in improving speaking skills

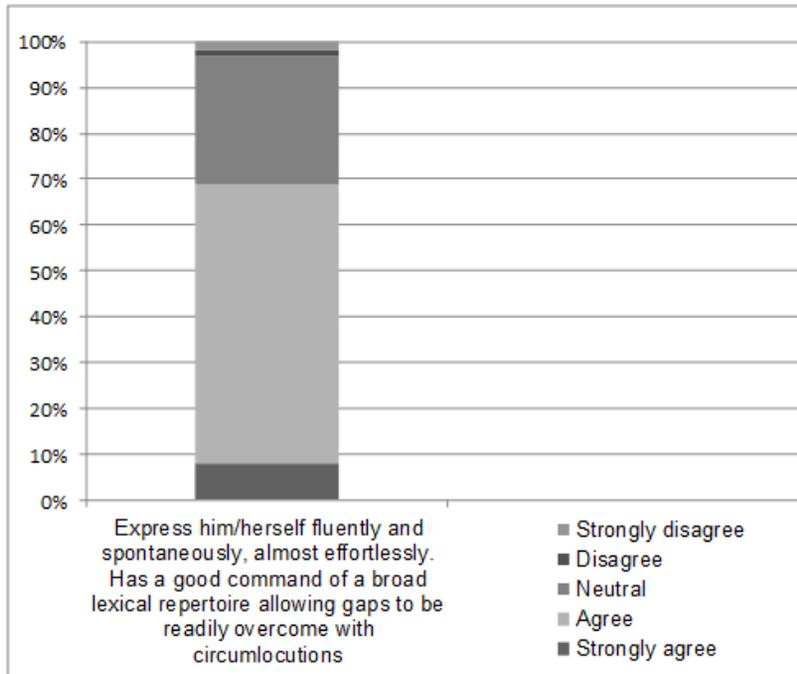


Fig. 2: Participants' opportunities in improving speaking skills when participating in language proficiency training courses

Information on the participants' improvement in speaking after the training courses is presented in Figure 2. Identical to listening skills, it is apparently clear that the responses of Strongly agree and Agree with around 70% are much larger than the rest, that is, trainees had betterment of speaking skills after the courses.

4.1.3 Opportunities in improving reading skills

With respect to the opportunities of high school EFL teachers in improving reading skills, Figure 3 represents the data collected. It is obvious from Figure 3 that positive responses capture more proportions than the negative ones by approximately 20%.

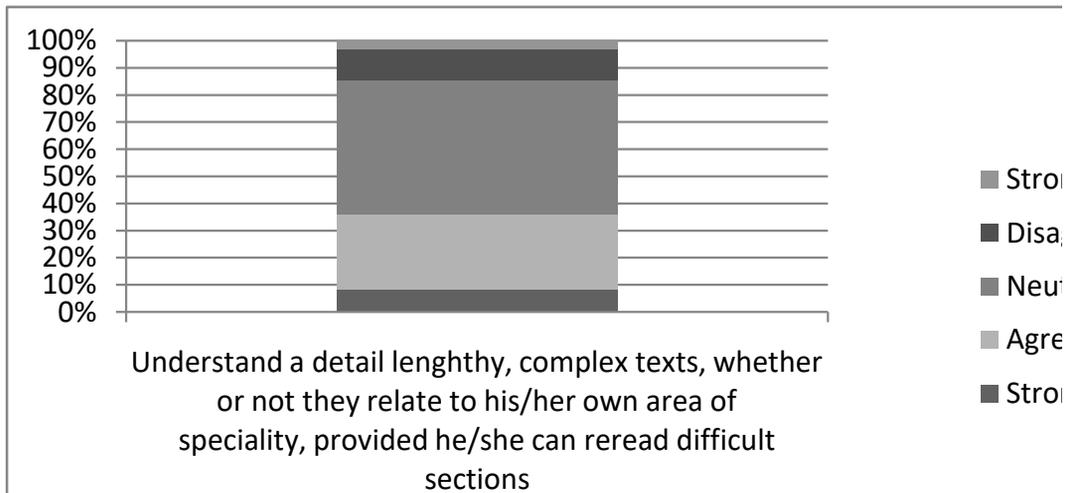


Fig. 3: Participants' opportunities in improving reading skills when participating in language proficiency training courses

4.1.4 Opportunities in improving writing skills

Figure 4 demonstrates the proportions of 2 writing features that trainees learnt from the training courses.

As shown in Figure 4, the positive responses of these features are overwhelming the negative ones with more than 70% and 80%, respectively.

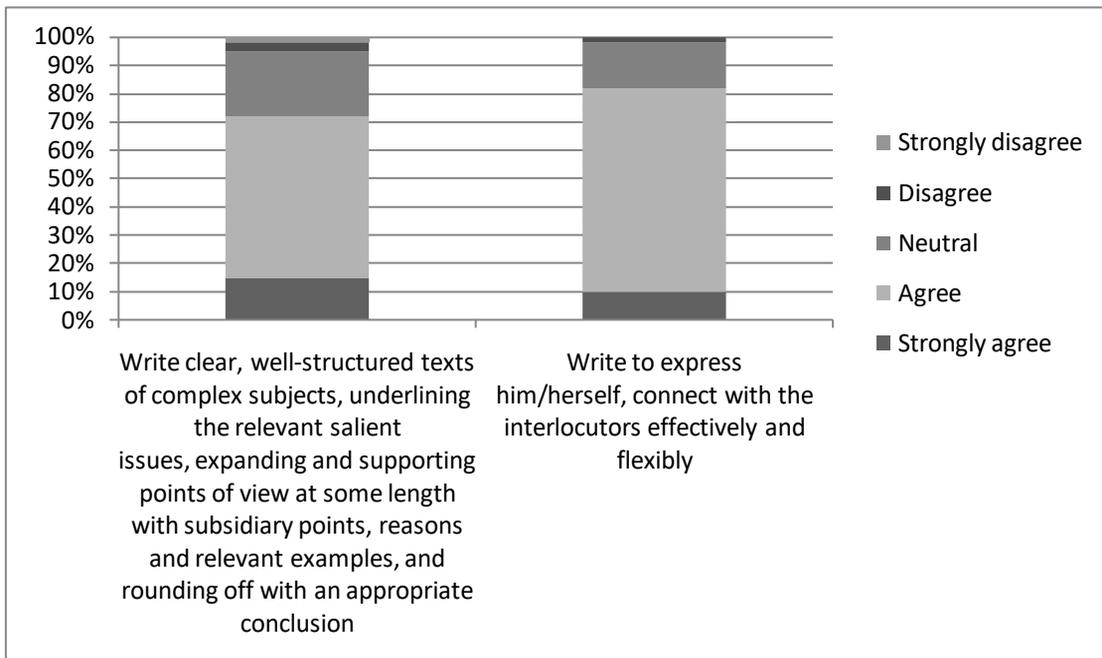


Fig. 4: Participants' opportunities in improving writing skills when participating in language proficiency training courses

As a whole, observing the information on the graphs above, high school EFL teachers strongly agreed/agreed that the training programs helped them improve English language skills, including listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Moreover, the proportions of Neutral are larger than the ones of negative responses. That is to say, EFL

teachers still doubted their listening ability. The researcher may suggest that it does not deduce that they are not good at listening, yet not confident about what they can do.

4.2 Participants' challenges when participating in language proficiency training courses

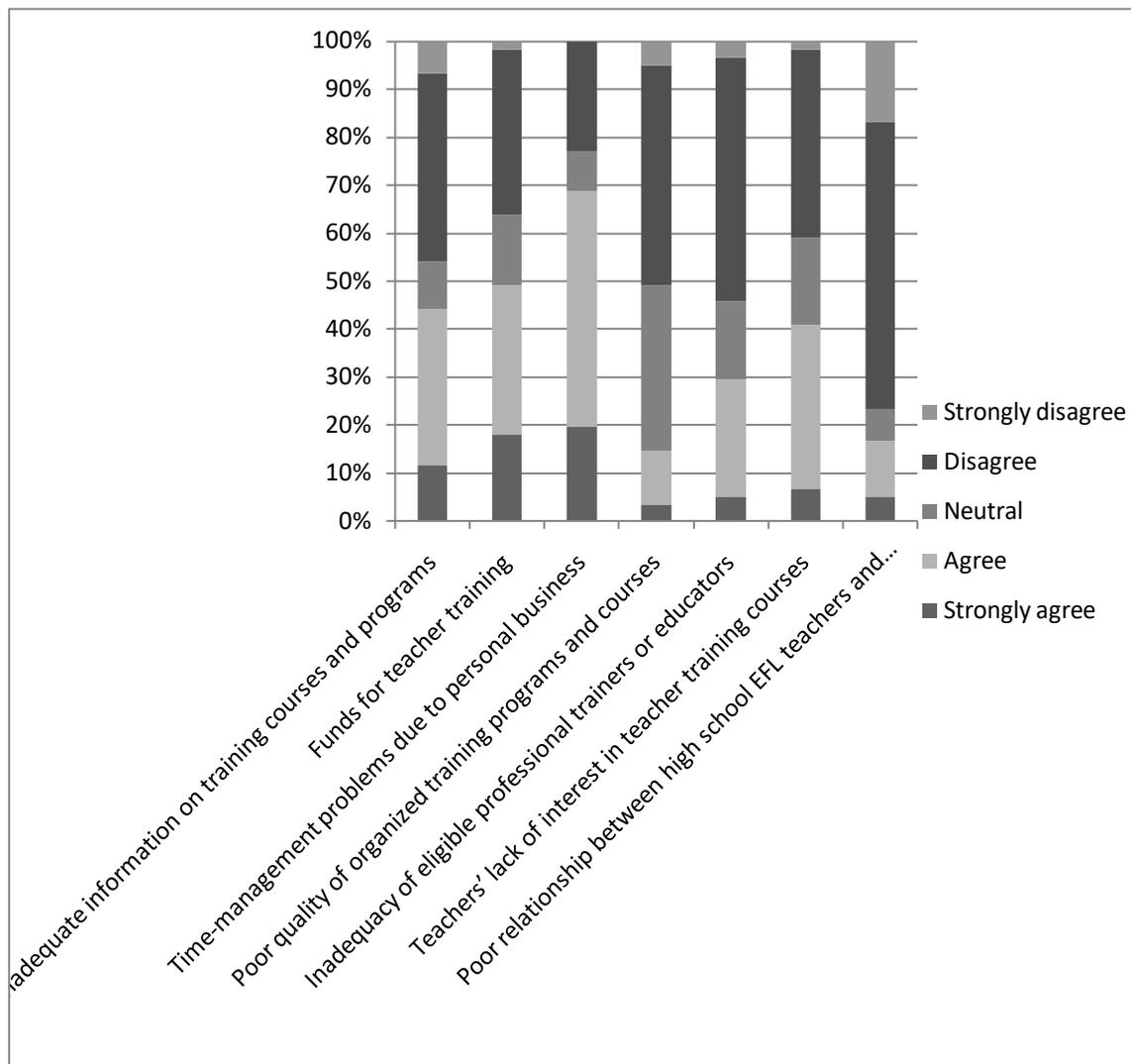


Fig. 5: Participants' challenges when participating in language proficiency training courses

Another important part of this study is to identify which challenges facing high school EFL teachers when they join the language proficiency training programs. Figure 5 above illustrates the findings of the second section of the questionnaire which surveyed the teachers to state which challenges they encountered in the courses. It is noticeable that the teachers did not see 'Inadequate information on training courses and programs', 'Poor quality of organized training programs and courses', 'Inadequacy of eligible professional trainers or educators', and 'Poor relationship between high school

EFL teachers and their managers' as their challenges because the Disagree and Strongly disagree responses constitute the majority of the percentage. In addition, there is a balance between the supporters and the opposites of the idea 'Teachers' lack of interest in teacher training courses'. The participants, however, agreed/ strongly agreed that they were dealing with problems related to expense and time, nearly 50% and 70%, respectively from the graph.

In short, the majority of the participants perceived 'Funds for teacher training' and 'Time-

management problems due to personal business' as their two main challenges when they were in language proficiency training courses.

Taking the results into account, EFL teachers in the study perceived the language proficiency training programs as opportunities to improve their English language skills. This is aligned with Fahmy and Bilton's (1992), Wati's (2011), and Doran's (2014) studies in terms of the effectiveness of the programs and the needs of the teachers. The findings were somehow contrast with Tawalbeh's (2015) and Alshumaimeri and Almohaisen's (2017). The researcher suggests two reasons: (1) the teachers' needs were taken into consideration in designing the teacher training programs and (2) the teachers had motivation to satisfy the linguistic requirements from MOET. With respect to the challenges facing the participating teachers, time and expense are the two most considerable factors hindering teachers from participating in teacher training courses due to the financial conditions and family status of the participants. These findings are fairly similar to those of the aforementioned studies.

5 CONCLUSIONS

In an attempt to gain more insights into EFL teachers' opportunities and challenges in improving language skills when participating in language proficiency training courses, the current study could draw out some conclusions below.

Firstly, the participants of the study agreed that after taking language proficiency training courses, their English language has been improved in terms of four skills, namely listening, speaking, reading, and writing. However, they were still not confident about their English ability. This becomes an essential need of EFL teachers to attend a next teacher training program which practice session hours must be the main concern. The results show that the participants were challenged by the time and expense problems for teacher training programs. The problems must be considered carefully by educational stakeholders.

With regard to the findings of this study and based on the literature review on Vietnamese Government's policies on teachers' professional development, it is worth considering conducting further research on EFL teachers' opportunities and challenges in pedagogical training programs

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