

A CRITICAL FRIEND GROUP FOR PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT: PERCEPTIONS OF EFL TEACHERS AT A UNIVERSITY IN VIETNAM

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Abstract. Engaging in ongoing professional development is needed for EFL teachers to ensure the sustainability and growth of their teaching profession and promote the quality of education. To develop teachers' instructional competence and performance, they need to be involved in professional development activities, one of which is a Critical Friends Group (CFG). However, it remains unclear how effective this activity is for EFL teachers in Asian contexts such as Vietnam, where collaborative work is not a common practice. This paper, adopting a qualitative design, explores teachers' perceptions of CFG for English language teachers' professional development. The data was captured from five EFL teachers at a university in Vietnam via a narrative frame. The findings indicate that the teachers viewed CFG as a practical approach to their professional development, fostering their collaborative and critical learning through activities such as reading, observations, and discussions on various English language learning and teaching issues. Additionally, the teachers perceived CFG as an ideal platform for personal, social, and professional growth, enhancing their professionalism while building mutual trust and understanding among colleagues. The study also suggests implications for exploiting the CFG approach in teacher professional development.

Keywords: CFG, EFL teachers, professional development (PD).

1. Introduction

In Vietnam, English has been taught and learned as a foreign language for many years. Recently, the Ministry of Education and Training of Vietnam has undertaken an effort to implement English as a second language in schools, as outlined in Conclusion No. 91-KL/TW (dated August 12, 2024) by the Politburo. The plan emphasizes the systemic reform of English language education to strengthen students' competence, including teacher training programs, curriculum development, and innovative teaching methods. Consequently, English teachers, especially novice ones, encounter numerous challenges.

Nowadays, professional development (hereinafter PD) is an essential aspect of teaching. It is considered an ongoing process which can be embedded in teachers' communities of practice (Johnson, 2006; Diaz-Maggioli, 2003) [1-2]. Teachers' professional development may include both individual activities and collaborative efforts (Brown & Lee, 2015; Diaz-Maggioli, 2003) [3-2]. Although individual efforts like self-study and formal training play a crucial role in PD, collaborative activities gain significance as they encourage teachers to learn together. Among

collaborative learning forms, Critical Friends Group (CFG for short) can be a good model for English language teachers.

CFG is a protocol-based form of collaborative PD aimed at developing democratic, reflective professional communities. CFG enables teachers to collaborate, refine their practice, and feel more like they belong in the profession because of shared inquiry and collegial dialogue (Andreu et al., 2003) [4]. In the Vietnamese context, where English language teaching plays a pivotal role in education, the applicability and effectiveness of CFG merit exploration. Although there have been several studies on CFG in Vietnam at the tertiary level, studies on how teachers reflect on their involvement in CFGs and how this reflective process supports their growth have been unexpectedly limited. This study, therefore, investigates how EFL teachers perceive CFG for their professional development at a university in Vietnam, shedding light on its potential to address local teaching challenges and support educators in their professional journeys.

This research aims to seek an answer to the following question: How do EFL Vietnamese teachers perceive the Critical Friends Group for their professional development?

2. Content

2.1. Review of Literature

According to Qiong (2017), perception is the process of gaining awareness or comprehension of “sensory information” [5]. In this context, perception is viewed as the teacher’s awareness and understanding of their teaching practices.

According to Glatthorn (1995), PD refers to what teachers develop with experience and reflection on their teaching over time. PD, which encompasses both individual and collaborative work, has been demonstrated to play a crucial role in a teacher's career, contributing to the improvement of teaching quality and effectiveness [6].

Among the most recognized forms of collaborative PD is the Critical Friends Group (CFG), a tool and process that fosters structured opportunities for teachers to engage in collaborative work within reflective learning communities rooted in democracy. Key (2006) [7] describes this type of PD as job-embedded professional development that centers around collaborative inquiry into student work and classroom practice. In this study, CFGs are communities of teachers who commit to improving their practice through collaborative learning and structured interactions (protocols), meeting at least once a month for approximately two hours (NSRF, 2014). The number of members in a CFG can range from 4 to 12, with its composition ultimately determined by those interested in establishing the group (NSRF, 2014; Franzak, 2002; McKenzie & Carr-Reardon, 2003 [8-9-10]).

According to Franzak (2002) [9], CFG operates through three main types of protocols. The first type contains a sample of student work from the teacher and an accompanying focusing question. The work is analyzed by members of the group who make hypotheses and enter into a discussion that is debriefed in the group. The second kind is peer observation in which one teacher observes the others, follows a set format and gives feedback on teaching. In the third type, problem-solving protocols centre on a specific dilemma presented by a single teacher. Participants engage in reflective dialogue by asking probing questions and discussing potential solutions, with the presenter synthesizing insights from the discussion. CFG offers a powerful model for supporting teachers’ professional development by fostering collaboration, critical inquiry, and reflective practices.

2.2. Previous studies

There has been a growth in the body of literature on Critical Friends Groups with a focus on three key areas: (1) Professional development and teaching practice improvement (Mat Noor &

Shafee, 2021; Rayamajhi, 2022) [11-12]; (2) Collaboration and professional identity formation (Rushton et al., 2023; Moore & Carter-Hicks, 2014) [13-14]; and (3) The role of culture and context in CFG applications (Vo & Nguyen, 2010; Greco, 2016) [15-16].

Firstly, the studies by Noor and Shafee (2021), Rayamajhi (2022), and Greco (2016) emphasized the role of CFGs in teachers' professional development, particularly in enhancing teaching practices [11-12-16]. Mat Noor and Shafee (2021) highlighted the importance of CFGs in action research, asserting that CFGs assist teachers in reflecting on, validating, and systematically improving their pedagogical practices. They proposed a critical friend framework aligned with self-reflective cycles, including reconnaissance, planning, action and observation, and reflection [11]. Similarly, Greco (2016) explored how CFGs support technology integration in teaching, specifically through the use of iPads for differentiated literacy instruction. Her findings demonstrated that CFGs enable teachers to balance and improve their teaching quality through structured interactions and mutual support [17].

Secondly, the studies by Rushton et al. (2023), and Moore and Carter-Hicks (2014) focus on how CFGs contributed to professional identity formation and collaboration within educational communities [13-14]. Rushton et al. (2023) investigated how CFGs shaped the professional identity development of pre-service teachers during the COVID-19 pandemic. Their findings revealed that collaboration within CFGs helped teachers better understand their societal role and navigated professional challenges [13]. On the other hand, Moore and Carter-Hicks (2014) examined CFGs within Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) among faculty members in higher education. They argued that CFGs were essential for sustaining faculty development and enhancing student outcomes through interdisciplinary collaboration [14].

Finally, the research by Vo and Nguyen (2010), and Greco (2016) focuses on the cultural and contextual aspects of CFG applications [15-16]. In their research, Vo and Nguyen (2010) explored the effectiveness of the CFG model in fostering professional development among Vietnamese university EFL teachers. The study employed observations and interviews to collect data from four tertiary English teachers. The findings revealed that CFGs enhanced collaborative and critical learning through such activities as peer observations, discussions, and feedback. Additionally, the teachers viewed CFG as a platform for personal, social, and professional growth, promoting mutual trust and understanding. CFG, at the same time, helped reduce professional isolation and build a supportive learning community. CFG, therefore, is a practical and adaptable model for teacher development with implications for broader implementation in similar educational contexts [15]. Greco (2016) also investigated CFGs in kindergarten settings for the integration of technology. She highlighted the importance of structured protocols and frameworks to guide group interactions and demonstrated the feasibility of CFGs in implementing technological tools in teaching practices [16].

Despite the growing literature, relatively few studies have specifically examined the impact of CFGs on individual teachers' professional development. This gap underscores the need for further research in this area. The current study, therefore, aims to explore how participants narrate the impact of CFGs on their professional development, delving into the reflective processes that contribute to their growth.

2.3. Methodology

2.3.1. Narrative Inquiry

Narrative inquiry was chosen for this research because it aligns with the study's emphasis on personal reflection and teachers' subjective experiences. The study aims to investigate how individual teachers reflect on their involvement in a Critical Friends Group (CFG) and how this reflective process aids their professional growth.

Narrative inquiry is a qualitative approach that centers on individuals' stories and experiences to gain insights into their perceptions, emotions, and meanings associated with specific events. In the field of language teacher education, narrative inquiry seeks to explore teachers' experiences within the unique contexts where they work, highlighting how personal storytelling shapes and reflects their understanding of the world. Narrative inquiry is especially well-suited for this type of investigation for several reasons:

Firstly, there is a lack of research on the topic of CFG in Vietnam. Therefore, the chosen research method should follow a qualitative and exploratory approach, which will help researchers gain new insights and theories from the data. The research design should be one that engages teachers in sharing their experiences, thereby making their world more accessible to both the researcher and the audience. Narrative inquiry meets these requirements, drawing from Dewey's educational philosophy, and facilitates the exploration of human experiences through storytelling.

Secondly, one aspect of this study that calls for a narrative inquiry approach is its emphasis on understanding the lived experiences of individual participants. As Creswell (2013) notes, narrative inquiry starts with the experiences conveyed through individuals' lived and shared stories [17]. This approach aligns with the study's aim to explore the impact of CFG on teachers' professional development within the context of their daily lives and teaching environments. The narrative inquiry approach uniquely enables the study to capture the distinctiveness of each teacher as revealed through their personal narratives.

Thirdly, narrative inquiry can offer profound insights into the environments in which participants live and share their stories. Barkhuizen (2008) argues that narrative inquiry can reflect the context on three interconnected levels. He illustrates this through a model of three concentric circles. The innermost circle represents the individual teachers' personal 'story', encompassing their inner thoughts, emotions, ideas, and theories regarding language assessment. The second level, 'Story', pertains to the teachers' work environment, where they have limited control over the complex variables shaping their assessment practices. The outermost level, 'STORY,' refers to the broader socio-political context, where teachers have even less influence over the external factors impacting their assessment practices. He recommends exploring all three levels, as they are interconnected and sometimes difficult to separate. [18]

The final justification for choosing narrative inquiry lies in its strength in prioritizing the voices of the participants. In this study, it enables teachers to share their thoughts, feelings, and reflections in a way that respects and values their unique perspectives. This approach is especially significant when examining the nuanced and individualized effects of CFGs on teachers' professional growth.

2.3.2. Context of the study

The study was conducted at a public university located in Hanoi, the capital city of Vietnam, which is referred to as the University to ensure anonymity. The University is now one of the country's largest higher education institutions, with a main mission of educating highly qualified teachers and researchers.

The Faculty of English of the University, hereby referred to as the Faculty, where the study was conducted, has been in operation for 20 years, and has successfully established its firm reputation as one of the most respectable for its English Language Teacher Education and English Linguistics programs. There are currently five divisions in the Faculty, namely the Division of English Language Proficiency Development, the Division of English Language Teaching Methodology, the Division of English Linguistics, the Division of Anglo-American Civilization and Culture Studies, and the Division of English for Specific Purposes.

The Faculty of English has a structured teacher training scheme, recruiting approximately 1-2 teachers each year. After selection, newly hired teachers spend a year working within one of the

five departments (primarily language practice or English for specific purposes). During this time, they are mentored by an experienced lecturer, attending their classes, collaborating on lesson planning, and co-designing teaching activities, with the goal of being able to teach independently.

Starting in the 2023-2024 academic year, the Division of English Language Proficiency Development introduced an innovative professional development initiative known as Critical Friends Groups (CFGs). CFG aims to foster collaborative growth and provide continuous support for young contract teachers. The CFG is composed of 1-2 experienced teachers and several younger teachers who seek to enhance their teaching skills. Members of the CFG meet weekly at the end of the week, using an online platform to ensure flexibility and accessibility for all participants. During these meetings, teachers share and discuss their ideas for upcoming classroom activities, focusing on the lessons planned for the following week. They reflect on the activities implemented during the past week, offering feedback and insights into what worked well and what could be improved. The CFG meetings are designed to be highly interactive and supportive, encouraging teachers to work together on lesson flow, co-create teaching materials, and refine classroom techniques such as warm-ups, group division, and other student-centered activities. The goal is to create a collaborative space where teachers can continuously learn from one another, build confidence in their teaching abilities, and improve the overall learning experience for students. Through these regular discussions and peer feedback, CFGs play a crucial role in helping contract teachers transition smoothly into independent teaching roles while maintaining a high standard of instruction.

2.3.3. Participants

The participants for this study include five lecturers of English at the Division of English Language Proficiency Development. They are our colleagues whom we have been working with for several years. The participants, ranging from 23-25 years old, have one to three years of working experience at the University. We all live in the same city and have regular contact as our shared work interests have brought us together. Trust had already been established due to our long and positive relationship history, which facilitated the creation of a safe and conducive field of inquiry for participants to share their lived experiences and meanings (Clandinin, 2013) [19].

2.3.4. Data collection instruments

The primary data collection tool for this study is the narrative frame, which provides structured prompts to guide participants in writing reflective stories based on specific themes or experiences. Narrative frames include “starters, connectives, and sentence modifiers” (Wray & Lewis, 1997) [20:122]. First proposed as a research instrument in a 2008 System article, this method helps participants focus their reflections. In this study, the narrative frame prompts teachers to reflect on their participation in CFG and its impact on their professional development. Open-ended prompts such as “Before joining the CFG, I used to think...” and “One specific moment in the CFG that changed my perspective was...” encourage deeper reflection. Participants would complete the narrative frame in writing, allowing time for thoughtful consideration of how CFG has influenced their teaching, colleague relationships, and professional growth.

For several reasons, we chose the narrative frame as the data collection tool. First, it provides guidance and support regarding structure and content (Barkhuizen, 2008) [18]. The narrative frame focuses participants on key aspects relevant to the research, such as the impact of Critical Friends Groups (CFG) on professional development, collaborative learning, and reflective practice. By guiding responses around specific experiences, it ensures that the data collected aligns with the research goals while yielding unique insights. This form of scaffolding helps to reduce participants’ anxiety (G. Barkhuizen, 2008) [18] when they participate in the study. Second, the structure of the narrative frame makes it easy to categorise and analyse data due to the sequential arrangement of the frame (G. Barkhuizen, 2008). Third, the use of narrative frames helps to limit the amount of data and information collected.

In this study, the narrative frame was adapted from the narrative frame used by G. Barkhuizen (2008) [18]. It includes structured prompts, such as sentence starters and transitional phrases, which help participants articulate their thoughts in a cohesive and narrative manner. These prompts focus on key themes, such as teachers' previous background and experiences, introduction to his/ her own teaching context, his/ her initial feelings and thoughts when he/ she heard about CFG, his/ her first experience in the CFG, key insights that he/ she from CFG, his/ her reflection on the impact or changes (if any) of CFG on his/ her teaching practice, his/ her reflection on his/ her teaching practice. At the same time, the frame still allowed for individual expression by providing space for personal and individual reflection. The frame was carefully crafted to balance structure and openness, ensuring that the participants could share meaningful insights while staying aligned with the research objectives

2.3.5. Procedure

For data collection, the participants were provided with the narrative frame and asked to complete it in writing at their own pace, allowing time for thoughtful reflection. Once collected, the written responses were subjected to thematic analysis. This involved reading through the narratives multiple times to identify recurring themes and patterns related to the research questions, such as the influence of CFG on professional development. The structured nature of the narrative frames facilitated the initial categorization of data, and themes were further refined through coding, ensuring a clear, organized analysis of the participants' reflections.

2.3.6. Data analysis

During the data analysis phase, we identified themes across the narratives using a general thematic approach known as narrative analysis (Barkhuizen et al., 2014) [21]. After gathering the participants' narratives, we analysed the data to identify common themes (Murray, 2009) [22] by applying various techniques, including comparison and contrast, unmarked texts, pawning, and cutting and sorting, as outlined by Ryan and Bernard (2003) [23]. The compare and contrast method involves comparing responses to questions across different individuals, contexts, and time periods, focusing on differences between texts and identifying commonalities. We also used hypothetical questions, such as "How does this text compare to my own experiences?" to deepen the analysis. The unmarked texts technique required multiple readings of the narratives, with each reading highlighting clear and emerging themes using different colors. This process continued until all obvious and subtle themes were identified. The pawning technique involved closely reviewing the texts and marking key phrases or important quotes, which were then grouped into categories. In contrast, the cutting and sorting method was more formal, as it required coding key phrases based on their origin in the text and grouping them into categories that represented the themes. We used the coding function of Atlas.ti to support this process, allowing the repeated application of these techniques. As themes were derived from the narratives, this method closely resembled open coding in grounded theory, qualitative analysis, or latent coding as used in classic content analysis (Berleson, 1952) [24].

2.4. Findings and Discussion

The data analysis of the five EFL teachers revealed that they generally held a positive perception of CFG as a vital platform for their professional development. They favorably perceived CFG as a practical approach to EFL teachers' professional development and an ideal platform for their personal, social, and professional growth and for cultivating mutual trust and understanding among colleagues.

2.4.1. CFG as a practical approach to EFL teachers' professional development

The participant teachers positively perceived CFG as a practical approach to their professional development.

First, all of the five teacher narrators demonstrated a favorable view of CFG which fostered their collaborative and critical learning through activities on various English language learning and teaching issues, such as reading, observations, and discussions to attain the expected targets. This resulted in their professional upgrading regarding language learning strategies and teaching methods. Teachers 1 and 5 said that:

I remember the first discussion centered around creating a lesson plan for a reading-writing session tailored for our first-year students. Since I usually rely on the textbook when planning my lessons, I initially felt I had little to offer. I was intimidated by the innovative ideas shared by others, ideas that seemed more creative than anything I had tried in my classes. (T1)

I am sure that CFG activities, such as reading, observations, and open discussions in either online or offline chats, helped me become more skilled at using technology in teaching and delivering more effective lectures in class, as I could freely exchange my views on teaching issues and receive valuable language learning knowledge and teaching experiences from other teachers. (T5)

Additionally, the teachers shared their ideas that they could deprivatize their practice via CFG, as they could freely share what they had learned, with nothing kept secret within the group. This environment allowed them to apply theoretical knowledge in practice, comfortably reflect on their daily teaching and learning experiences without any imposition about what they could do rather than being told what to do, and promote new methods of discussing their work and connections among the participants. Teachers 2 and 6 stated that:

Interestingly, CFG provides an ideal platform for applying theoretical knowledge and reflecting on real-life teaching experiences... (T2)

Via CFG, there is no pressure from anyone when we participate in the discussion. All members of our group can share any new insights we've discovered about a particular topic we have read or covered in class... (T6)

Moreover, most participant teachers narrated that collective thinking through collaborative discussions and observations in CFG encouraged them to interpret, transfer, and internalize their newly acquired knowledge in their teaching practices. Also, it enabled individual teachers to form their perspectives and showcase their strengths to others, all of which stimulated the teachers' professional growth and created a friendly environment in which they could thrive. Teachers 4 and 1 stated that:

Through CFG, I found that thinking collectively by engaging in collaborative discussions and observations helped me apply new ideas to my teaching practices. (T4)

Being part of CFG made me more confident in developing my perspective and sharing my strengths with others.... (T1)

Finally, all five participants shared their thoughts that through CFG critical discussions and observations, they could share their thinking, identify challenges, and work out solutions to issues experienced in their professional paths. This implies that engaging actively in CFG could facilitate their habits of sharing and mutual support when encountering obstacles in their instructional practices, which would help the teachers accomplish their shared goals. As teachers 2 and 3 said

Via CFG teamwork, I have learned how collective thinking can provoke creative solutions. (T2)

I feel like that being part of CFG has taught me the value of working collaboratively. When we exchange our experiences and challenges in teaching, we work out solutions and cultivate a robust sense of community and support among teachers... (T3)

2.4.2. CFG as an ideal platform for the teachers' growth

The participant teachers perceived CFG as a perfect platform for their personal, social, and professional growth. As commented by the participating teachers, CFG was considered a

professional support for their personal and social development. It was a crucial professional community where the teachers supported each other's personal and social growth through critical collaborative activities, such as reading, observations, and the free exchange of ideas, to determine what is right rather than who is right. Accordingly, the teachers developed skills in conflict management, group and pair work, communication, and critical thinking. And more importantly, it fostered their more excellent reflections on teaching methods, ultimately leading to changes in student outcomes. Teachers 3 and 4 pointed out that:

I believe that CFG has undoubtedly provided a foundation for my professional, personal, and social growth. It has taught me how to collaborate successfully in a professional group, embrace and use others' perspectives for self-improvement, freely give and receive constructive feedback, and respect others' feelings to foster robust collegial relationships in the workplace. (T4)

Participating in the CFG, I have learned the value of others' perspectives for my personal, social, and professional development. I have made several changes to my teaching practices. (T3)

Furthermore, all five teachers narrated that CFG enhanced their professionalism while building mutual trust and understanding among colleagues. It created a safe space for honestly sharing and collaboratively discussing their personal and teaching obstacles, student-related problems, and stressful situations that influenced their teaching. Accordingly, such a friendly environment encouraged them to trust and understand mutually, share their personal and professional knowledge and experiences comfortably, and support one another in their teaching career.

Joining CFG has helped me share my experiences confidently. Moreover, adopting others' best practices has not only enhanced my teaching strategies but also developed a sense of friendship. (T5)

CFG has produced an open and respectful space where I feel safe discussing my personal and instructional struggles... Therefore, I have grown professionally and maintained closer contact with my colleagues grounded in trust and mutual understanding. (T6)

The overall result of the study highly accords with that of numerous prior research studies, indicating that the teachers expressed a favorable view of CFG as a vital platform for their professional development (e.g., Greco, 2016; Noor & Shafee, 2021; Rayamajhi, 2022; Vo & Nguyen, 2010) [16-11-12-15]. However, this study has certain divergences compared with other previous inquiries. While those studies reveal CFG as a broader network for the language teachers' professional learning, facilitating inter-school connections (Moore & Carter-Hicks, 2014; Rayamajhi, 2022) [14-12], and underscore the obstacles of employing CFG in Asian contexts, where teachers traditionally work independently (Rayamajhi, 2022; Vo & Nguyen, 2010) [12, 15], the study highlights EFL Vietnamese teachers' reversal of privatized practice and transformation of individual challenges into opportunities for growth, offering a supportive environment for their open critical discussions on learning and teaching success, challenges, and practice-sharing which nurtures teachers' self-directed learning and thus results in their personal and professional development.

Particularly, the EFL Vietnamese teachers' positive perception of CFG as a practical approach to their professional development is in congruence with the findings of Rayamajhi (2022) [12], Noor and Shafee (2021) [11], Vo and Nguyen (2010) [15], in which the role of CFG in fostering teachers' collaborative and critical learning, dealing with teaching challenges, and accelerating the application of their shared knowledge to their teaching practices, enhancing teaching practices, and therefore improving student outcomes are acknowledged. Additionally, the result of this study aligns with that of prior research in highlighting the collective merits of CFGs as an ideal platform for teachers' professional, personal, and social growth and for cultivating mutual trust and understanding among colleagues (Rayamajhi, 2022; Vo & Nguyen, 2010) [12-15]. Unlike prior studies in the literature (e.g., Moore & Carter-Hicks, 2014; Vo & Nguyen, 2010) [14-15], which highlighted teacher collaborative learning, this research project

further explored how CFGs fostered EFL teachers' vital interpersonal skills such as communication, conflict management, and group collaboration, which not only developed their professional interactions but also facilitated their broader personal and social growth, ultimately enhancing their collegial relationships, trust and mutual understanding, and more importantly, enhancing their teaching practices.

3. Conclusions

This study highlights the crucial role of Critical Friends Groups (CFGs) in promoting EFL teachers' professional development within the Vietnamese educational context. The findings highlight CFG as an effective platform for collaborative and critical learning, enabling teachers to share practices, refine teaching methodologies, and overcome professional challenges. Furthermore, it supports teachers' personal, social, and professional growth by cultivating mutual trust, understanding, and collegial relationships.

This research study contributes new insights through the voices and perceptions of Vietnamese EFL teachers on their career development. However, it explores only the merits of CFG; therefore, it is recommended that future inquiries expand on these insights by investigating potential challenges, such as time constraints, administrative support, and resistance to collaboration, as well as the long-term impacts of CFG on student outcomes and its applicability across different cultural and institutional contexts. Further research could also collect data from a larger sample size to provide a more comprehensive understanding of CFG. Additionally, the integration of CFG into teacher training programs could be measured to enhance its implementation and effectiveness in diverse educational settings.

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