

EFL Teachers' Preferences for Professional Development Initiatives in Thai Educational Context

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Abstract

Teacher professional development (TPD) frequently fails to produce sustained classroom implementation due to top-down designs that neglect teacher realities. This case study explored Thai secondary English language teachers' preferences for TPD initiatives in Khon Kaen Province, Thailand, addressing the execution gap between training acquisition and real-world instruction. Guided by a case study design, data collection was conducted in two sequential stages. First, an online survey gathered preliminary data from 221 public secondary school English teachers. Subsequently, qualitative semi-structured interviews were conducted with 16 teachers possessing 5 to 10 years of experience and participation in over five Ministry-sponsored TPD programs. Survey data were evaluated using descriptive statistics, while interview transcripts were analyzed using thematic analysis. Analysis of 274 relevant teacher statements identified three core themes defining effective TPD: TPD with knowledge application (64.96%), TPD with collaboration (20.80%), and TPD with feedback/follow-up process (14.23%). Within knowledge application, teachers prioritized hands-on activities (42.70%), such as micro-teaching, and contextually relevant content (22.26%). Qualitative findings confirmed that teachers value practical, interactive experiences matched to their classroom contexts and view structured follow-up as vital for evaluating sustained instructional impact. Effective TPD requires shifting from top-down, lecture-style models toward teacher-centered, agency-driven frameworks. Incorporating pre-training needs assessments, hands-on activities, context-matched content, and systematic feedback mechanisms enhances teacher engagement and pedagogical transfer. Educational leaders and policymakers must prioritize teacher input to design sustainable professional learning that directly improves language classroom instruction.

Keywords: English language teachers, professional development, teacher preferences, teacher learning

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1. Introduction

Teacher professional development (TPD) plays a foundational role in maintaining educational quality and driving continuous instructional improvement across language education contexts (Darling-Hammond et al., 2020; Gavrilas & Kotsis, 2026; Yang & Boonmoh, 2026). Grounded in sociocultural theory and adult learning frameworks—such as Knowles' andragogy and Vygotsky's social constructivism—effective TPD is theoretically conceptualized not as a passive transmission of knowledge, but as an interactive, reflective, and collaborative process of active learning (Liu & Zhang, 2024). Modern conceptual frameworks for effective TPD emphasize key core features: content focus, active learning, coherence with curriculum policies, duration, and collective participation (Gavrilas & Kotsis, 2026; Murray et al., 2023). As global communication needs shift and pedagogical paradigms evolve—particularly alongside the rapid integration of digital technologies and post-pandemic teaching environments—English language teachers are increasingly required to refine their practices and adapt to dynamic, technology-enhanced classrooms within these frameworks to improve classroom instruction and student outcomes (Ersanli & Yi, 2022; MacIntyre et al., 2020; Yang & Boonmoh, 2026). To keep pace with these demands, educational institutions and ministries of education dedicate significant financial and organizational resources to designing and delivering structured professional development workshops, seminars, and digital training programs (Ersanli & Yi, 2022). The core assumption driving these substantial investments is that structured professional learning opportunities foster enhanced teacher knowledge and pedagogical skills, which directly translate into improved classroom practices and elevated student learning outcomes (Liang, 2025; Liu & Zhang, 2024).

Despite these theoretical foundations and ongoing investments, a persistent challenge in educational research is the execution gap between knowledge acquisition in TPD programs and sustained implementation in actual classroom settings (Liu & Zhang, 2024; Murray et al., 2023). Extensive empirical literature demonstrates that teachers routinely encounter severe systemic and pedagogical barriers, including rigid top-down training mandates, heavy administrative workloads, oversized classes, inadequate digital resources, and alignment pressure from high-stakes standardized testing (Dhillon & Murray, 2021; MacIntyre et al., 2020; Phantharakphong & Liyanage, 2026; Weerathong, 2024). A major underlying cause of this disconnect is that many TPD initiatives are conceptualized using top-down, "one-size-fits-all" delivery models that prioritize policy compliance over the nuanced, context-specific needs of teachers (Murray et al., 2023). By failing to account for teachers' daily classroom realities, administrative burdens, and individual preferences regarding content and delivery formats, standardized TPD initiatives often lead to low teacher buy-in, minimal engagement, and negligible long-term pedagogical impact (Liang, 2025).

In the Thai educational context, these challenges are particularly pronounced. English language teachers in Thailand frequently navigate systemic pressures, including large class sizes, heavy administrative workloads, limited digital and teaching resources, and centralized curricula that prioritize standardized testing over communicative competence (Imsa-ard et al., 2021; Phantharakphong & Liyanage, 2026; Sameephet, 2020). Furthermore, many nationwide TPD initiatives in Thailand have historically relied on short-term, lecture-based workshops or mandatory online training modules that operate without continuous post-training support or consideration for local school environments (Damnet, 2021). When Thai EFL teachers are expected to implement communicative language teaching (CLT) or active learning approaches without TPD frameworks that match their actual classroom conditions and preferences, friction

arises between top-down policy expectations and practical implementation (Phantharakphong & Liyanage, 2026).

This structural disconnect creates a core research problem: without clear empirical data on what Thai English language teachers actually prefer and prioritize in TPD initiatives, educational stakeholders will continue to spend resources on training models that fail to produce long-term instructional change. To address this problem, this study examines the specific preferences Thai English language educators hold regarding TPD content, delivery modes, and ongoing support structures. Specifically, it seeks to answer the central research question: What preferences do English language teachers have for teacher professional development initiatives? Utilizing a research design that captures both overarching preference trends and the qualitative reasons behind them, this study aims to provide educational leaders, Ministry of Education officials, and TPD facilitators with actionable, evidence-based insights to design teacher-centered professional development.

2. Methods

The choice of research design and overarching methodology in any academic inquiry is inherently guided by the researchers' underlying philosophical attitudes, beliefs, and values regarding the nature of knowledge and reality (Quinlan, 2019). Given that the primary objective of this study was to explore English language teachers' preferences for teacher professional development (TPD) initiatives, a case study design was adopted as the primary research methodology. This approach was selected to develop an intensive, contextualized insight into the case through in-depth discussions regarding the participants' specific TPD preferences, professional constraints, and institutional environments. The geographic boundary for this case study was localized to public secondary schools situated within Khon Kaen Province, Thailand.

The target population for this study comprised 221 Thai secondary-level English language teachers currently employed in public schools across Khon Kaen Province, Thailand, from which a sample of volunteer participants was drawn. Data collection was executed in two sequential stages. In Stage 1, an online survey was distributed to the target population of 430 teachers to gather preliminary empirical data on teacher preferences and demographic profiles. Following the preliminary survey phase, a total of 16 teachers voluntarily opted to participate in subsequent qualitative semi-structured interviews. To ensure that the interview sample possessed sufficient contextual experience to evaluate professional learning initiatives, participants were selected based on two explicit purposive criteria: first, the participant had attended more than five official TPD initiatives organized and sponsored by the Thai Ministry of Education; second, the participant was a Thai national teaching English in a public secondary school in Khon Kaen Province with between 5 and 10 years of formal classroom teaching experience.

Data collection was carried out through the sequential combination of the online survey and the follow-up semi-structured interviews. Following the initial distribution and preliminary analysis of the online survey, qualitative semi-structured interviews were conducted with the 16 qualified volunteer teachers. The interview protocol was specifically designed to expand upon the initial survey findings, allowing participants to articulate the rationale behind their TPD preferences, share their experiences with Ministry-sponsored programs, and discuss the contextual factors influencing their professional learning.

Data gathered from both research instruments were subjected to distinct analytical procedures. Quantitative responses from the online survey were compiled and evaluated using descriptive statistics, specifically utilizing mean scores, frequencies, and percentages to establish baseline patterns across the sample. Concurrently, the qualitative data derived from the semi-structured interview transcripts were evaluated using Thematic Analysis (TA) (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The qualitative data were coded systematically to uncover recurring patterns, group meaningful codes into broader conceptual categories, and synthesize core insights regarding teachers' priorities, agency, and perceived needs for future professional development initiatives.

3. Results and Discussion

An online survey asked the teachers to list their ideas about what constituted effective TPD. Their written responses were categorised and frequency count recorded. The different categories were then sorted into three major themes of TPD with knowledge application, TPD with collaboration, and TPD with feedback/follow-up process. The results are displayed in Table 1.

Table 1: *Effective professional development*

Themes	Sub-categories	Frequency	Percentage
TPD with knowledge application	Hands-on activities	117	42.70
	Contextual relevance	61	22.26
TPD with collaboration (e.g., shared experiences)		57	20.80
TPD with feedback/follow-up process		39	14.23
Total		274	100

A total of 274 relevant teacher statements regarding the perceived characteristics of effective teacher professional development (TPD) were identified and categorized into three primary themes: TPD with Knowledge Application, TPD with Collaboration, and TPD with Feedback/Follow-up Process. Quantitative frequency analysis revealed that the largest proportion of responses pertained to TPD with Knowledge Application, accounting for nearly two-thirds of the total statements ($n = 178$, 64.96%). Within this theme, frequency analysis revealed two distinct sub-categories: hands-on activities, which comprised of total statements ($n = 117$), and contextually relevant knowledge, which comprised of total statements ($n = 61$). The second theme, TPD with collaboration, represented of total responses ($n = 57$), specifically highlighting opportunities for sharing classroom experiences with colleagues following TPD participation. The final theme, TPD with feedback/follow-up process, received the lowest frequency of statements, representing 14.23% of total responses ($n = 39$), highlighting the role of follow-up engagement and the continued application of learning following TPD initiatives.

These quantitative distributions align seamlessly with the qualitative interview findings, which underscored that TPD was most effective when it directly aligned with teachers' interests, offers practical, real-world learning, and includes continuous follow-up. For example, P4 commented on what she wanted to have in TPD to make it more effective:

I believe if the training involves media and real interaction, teachers can better reflect on the activities and their effectiveness. If once the training is over, there is nothing more, its effectiveness will be unknown. It should be taken into account whether there has been interaction and activities done together. Then, there may be a follow-up and feedback as well. (lines 158-161)

This convergence of survey and interview data reinforces the arguments of Atkinson and King (2023) and Barrientos-Moncada et al. (2023), who emphasize that English language teachers possess unique contextual needs that cannot be addressed through generic, top-down instruction. Consequently, incorporating systematic teacher input prior to program design is paramount to ensuring TPD relevance and fostering active participation.

3.1. Aligning TPD with Teacher Needs and Interests

The qualitative data further revealed that when TPD initiatives align directly with educators' self-identified needs and professional interests, teacher motivation to participate increases significantly. For example, P6 explained:

For instance, if we focus on training high school teachers specifically for certain skills, styles, or using games and media, the participants would be more interested and feel that the topic aligns with their needs. This would lead to more enthusiasm among the participants to join the training. (lines 142-145)

These insights mirror the findings of Penner-Williams et al. (2019) and Sancar et al. (2021), who contend that pairing contemporary pedagogical knowledge with practical classroom applications increases the perceived utility of professional training. When educators recognize the direct alignment between TPD content and their daily responsibilities, their enthusiasm translates into sustained instructional performance and enhanced student outcomes.

3.2. Authentic Learning and Hands-On Pedagogy

To maximize instructional efficacy, participants demonstrated a strong preference for hands-on, interactive learning modalities, such as micro-teaching, collaborative lesson planning, and peer presentations. These authentic learning experiences serve as a bridge between theoretical concepts and practical execution, as P9 reflected:

It helps me improve in teaching management because I have thought and acted at that time. And then it could be applied to students too. It's like making us see the picture that if we use it with real students, how good or bad it will be" (P9, lines 116-118).

In alignment with Romijn et al. (2021), tailoring TPD activities to teachers' specific instructional settings increases the likelihood that educators will successfully apply new knowledge in their classrooms.

3.3. Contextual Relevance as a Prerequisite for Implementation

Beyond acquiring new knowledge and skills, teachers were expected to apply their TPD learning directly in the classroom. Consequently, participants stressed that contextual relevance is a critical factor for successful implementation. Thus is reinforced in P12's comment:

My top choice is engaging in professional development that aligns with the teaching context because I believe that participating in professional development activities that directly relate to my teaching context allows me to apply the techniques I learn to actual teaching and learning scenarios. (lines 143-145)

Without explicit alignment to local school environments, class sizes, and resource availability, newly acquired skills remain theoretical rather than operational.

3.4. The Strategic Role of Systematic Follow-Up and Feedback

Even though teachers had negative perspectives on the follow-up process, they understood that this activity was important to their teaching profession, as noted by P6 who mentioned the benefits of the follow-up process in TPD initiatives: "... when there is a follow-up or a similar training that requires us to reflect on the results after completion, it becomes more beneficial. We can assess if we have used that knowledge effectively and whether it has been valuable in our teaching practice" (lines 113-116). As such, in order to make the follow-up activity more effective, P4 suggested it be consistently and systematically implemented:

By consistently reflecting and developing our teaching practices, we can see the positive impact it has on our students' learning. If there are activities that can reflect results and have a good process like this, it should be okay because, nowadays, if the process is not followed up, we wouldn't even know that we did that thing there. How effective is it?" (lines 123-127).

This underscores the necessity of well-structured follow-up mechanisms that ensure teachers receive actionable, constructive feedback. Consequently, this study challenges education authorities and TPD providers to evaluate whether structured, feedback-driven follow-up is integrated into program design prior to implementation, and whether systems are in place to support teachers as they apply new knowledge in their classrooms post-training.

Ultimately, these findings highlight the urgent need to shift from passive, workshop-based TPD to dynamic, teacher-centered learning frameworks. To ensure long-term instructional impact, educational policymakers and TPD designers must prioritize comprehensive pre-training needs assessments, embed authentic hands-on learning, match content to local classroom realities, and establish systematic, constructive follow-up mechanisms that honor teacher agency and voice.

4. Conclusion

This study investigated the preferences of secondary-level English language teachers in Khon Kaen Province, Thailand, regarding teacher professional development (TPD) initiatives. By employing a case study approach, the research addressed a critical gap in the literature concerning the execution divide between TPD attendance and classroom implementation. The investigation revealed that secondary school English language teachers in Khon Kaen Province prioritize TPD that is practical, collaborative, and contextually grounded. Quantitatively, a total of 274 relevant statements regarding effective TPD characteristics were categorized across three primary themes. The most dominant theme was TPD with knowledge application, accounting for nearly 65% of all responses (64.96%, $n = 178$). Within this theme, participants expressed a marked preference for hands-on activities (42.70%, $n = 117$), such as micro-teaching and lesson planning, followed by contextual relevance (22.26%, $n = 61$). The second major theme, TPD with collaboration, represented of responses ($n = 57$), emphasizing peer interaction and experience sharing. Finally, TPD with feedback and follow-up processes accounted for of responses ($n = 39$). Qualitatively, interview data reinforced these survey trends: teachers noted that training is most effective when tailored to their actual needs, classroom realities, and while follow-up processes are often viewed critically due to administrative burden, systematic post-training feedback is recognized as vital for evaluating sustained instructional impact.

This study contributes to the literature on English Language Teaching (ELT) and teacher professional development by addressing the execution gap between training acquisition and classroom implementation within the Thai public school context. Conceptually, it shifts the focus from top-down, policy-driven TPD mandates to a teacher-centered model grounded in teacher agency and contextual reality. By providing empirical evidence on what language teachers explicitly value—specifically hands-on practice, context-matched content, peer collaboration, and structured feedback mechanisms—the research demonstrates that accounting for pre-training teacher needs directly enhances educator enthusiasm and instructional transfer. Furthermore, it challenges education authorities, policymakers, and TPD designers in Thailand to move away from isolated, lecture-style workshops toward interactive, micro-teaching-oriented modules—supported by continuous, low-friction follow-up mechanisms in order to provide a far more effective framework for fostering genuine educational reform in language classrooms.

Several methodological constraints qualify the scope of these findings. First, the geographical and institutional scope was restricted to public secondary school EFL teachers within a single province (Khon Kaen, Thailand), which limits the immediate generalizability of the quantitative percentages to primary school contexts, private institutions, or other geographic regions. Second, while the initial survey targeted a broader population, the qualitative interview sample was purposefully restricted to teachers possessing 5 to 10 years of experience, thereby excluding the perspectives of novice educators and veteran teachers whose TPD preferences may differ. Finally, the study relied primarily on self-reported survey data and interview reflections rather than direct classroom observations or longitudinal measurements of student learning outcomes post-TPD.

Building on these insights, future research should expand the empirical base through longitudinal, multi-regional studies across diverse educational settings in Thailand. Researchers are encouraged to conduct comparative investigations contrasting the TPD preferences of primary versus secondary EFL teachers, as well as novice versus experienced educators, to determine how career stages influence professional learning priorities. Additionally, future studies should incorporate direct observational methods—such as classroom video analysis and longitudinal tracking—to empirically evaluate the degree to which hands-on TPD initiatives and systematic feedback structures lead to observable changes in teaching practices and measurable improvements in student communicative competence over time.

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