

## **Understanding Obstacles to Online Professional Development through the Lens of EFL Teachers' Attitudes: A Qualitative Study in Vietnam context**

My T. Truong (truongthimy@hanu.edu.vn)  
Hanoi University, Vietnam

Jill Murray (jill.murray@mq.edu.au)  
Macquarie University, Australia

### **Abstract**

Online language training courses have recently emerged as a promising professional development option for teachers of English as a foreign language (EFL) because of their convenience, quality, and potential contribution to teachers' ability to use technology in their practice. In several contexts including Vietnam, however, virtual learning environments remain an unpopular choice. This qualitative study aims to explain the situation through the lens of teachers' attitudes – a psychological factor believed to significantly shape teachers' professional development behaviors. Semi-structured interviews were conducted and thematically analysed to explore nineteen EFL teachers' views of a particular virtual language training course, and of online teacher professional development (OTPD) more broadly. The results showed predominantly positive viewpoints, confirmed the central place of technology in OTPD, and added well-established social norms as a new barrier besides other commonly recognized ones (course features, teachers' technology efficacy, and self-regulation ability) that online training courses need overcome to be more widely accepted by EFL teachers.

*Keywords:* teacher attitude, online teacher professional development, obstacles, EFL, teacher education.

### **Introduction**

Online training courses have recently emerged as a promising professional development (PD) option for teachers of English as a foreign language (EFL) because of its unique benefits compared to the face-to-face counterpart. Easy access but of equivalent quality, great flexibility, more opportunities to learn from top scholars in the field, and membership participation in a massive professional community are just some of the multifold merits of e-learning for in-service teachers (Nunan, 2012). Teachers' acceptance and adoption of online technology for PD, however, is largely dependent on their attitude towards online learning in general and the online course offered to them in particular (Wasserman & Migdal, 2019). Valuable insights into the factors that may bar teachers from participating in

online professional development (OTPD), despite its numerous benefits, can be obtained by exploring teachers' attitudes pertaining to this teacher professional development (TPD) mode.

This study examines the attitudes of the teacher trainees in an OTPD initiative, named English Discovery Online (EDO) - the virtual component of the teacher training program in National Project 2020 (henceforth Project 2020) run by Vietnam Ministry of Education and Training (MoET) to help EFL teachers nationwide upgrade their English proficiency to new national standards. EFL instructors participating in Project 2020 had to attend required face-to-face classes on a fixed schedule while maintaining their normal school workload. In response to widespread complaints from trainees regarding the time constraint and the resulting ineffectiveness of the purely face-to-face model (Parks, 2011), EDO was added to markedly increase their learning time without affecting their work commitment (Pham, 2012). Unlike other TPD training courses, EDO is also unique in its strong focus on English language proficiency instead of pedagogical knowledge (Pham, 2012). Participants of EDO are, therefore, not only developing EFL professionals but also continuing EFL learners.

A trainer of Project 2020, the first author became interested in what the participating EFL teachers think about EDO and OTPD more generally. Adhering to the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) developed by Davis (1989), this study was conducted to gauge insights into the factors that may prevent these teachers from engaging in EDO and future OTPD courses, the PD model that appears to work best for them. The findings of the study would enrich the existing literature that features scant empirical research exploring obstacles to OTPD from teachers' perspectives. In practical terms, the study helps to identify important areas where EDO and similar OTPD initiatives need adjusting to be more widely accepted by EFL instructors.

## **Literature Review and Theoretical Framework**

### **Online Teacher Professional Development: Merits and Challenges**

Online teacher professional development is defined as a mode of TPD that allows teachers, via information communication media, to conduct their continued learning without the need of meeting their instructors and peers in persons (Rogers, 2001). Communicative interactions between trainers and learners in OTPD can be synchronous (both parties are concurrently present for the communication to occur) (Romiszowski & Mason, 2004), or asynchronous (trainers and trainees participate in the communication process at different points in time) (Anderson & Kanuka, 2006).

The benefits of online learning are manifold. The time, place, or even the pace of learning can all be determined by learners (Johnson & Palmer, 2015). Travelling cost and absence from work are therefore minor concerns for e-learners. Quality of online courses, meanwhile, can still be assured by opportunities for access to leading experts and membership to a massive virtual community of practice (Nunan, 2012). Since social relationships and learning collaborations in online courses operate via technological tools rather than direct face-to-face interactions, e-learning is furthermore believed to protect

learners' self-image, increasing their confidence and active participation in learning (Truong & Murray, 2019; Tudor, Stan, & Paisi-Lazarescu, 2015). Lastly, many online courses are excellent examples of how teaching and learning can be enhanced by information and communication technology (ICT). Participation in OTPD is thus expected to raise attendees' awareness of the educational usage of web tools, and enrich their repertoire of ICT-mediated teaching techniques (National Research Council, 2007).

Despite these benefits, there also exist various factors that may make some teachers prefer face-to-face training mode. First, e-learners may feel lonely and disconnected (Nunan, 2012; O'Bannon et al., 2013). Although a certain level of isolation may help to reduce social anxiety in some learners (Truong & Murray, 2019), many learners felt demotivated by the dearth of personalized feedback in online courses (Truong & Murray, 2019; Fletcher & Bullock, 2015), and the constraint on the use of non-verbal cues such as body language in online communications was found to diminish e-students' learning enjoyment (Drange & Roarson, 2015). Online courses are moreover highly demanding of learners' self-discipline (Drange & Roarson, 2015) and heavily dependent on technology (Truong & Murray, 2019). Regarding time requirement, online learning is considered time-consuming, sometimes even more than the conventional alternatives (Nunan, 2012). Although an online course can save attendees travelling time, it takes participants an equivalent amount of time to complete learning tasks compared to a face-to-face option, plus some extra to operate online apps. Such added time, was in fact, felt as pressure by many OTPD participants (Hunt-Barron et al., 2015). In addition, going online means going more public with one's practices, an experience that many teachers may naturally find uncomfortable due to humans' natural desire for privacy (Hunt-Barron et al., 2015). Finally, obstacles to OTPD also come from it being a fairly new PD model. Teachers may not know where to find such courses or doubt their quality due to their inexperience with OTPD and a lack of available scientific proof on its effectiveness. School administrators, being also unfamiliar with OTPD, may unfairly assume that teachers can manage their full-time workload while joining flexible online training, and thus offer less support for e-trainees than traditional course attendees (National Research Council, 2007).

In short, although OTPD offers many unique benefits to teachers, its implementation is challenged by various factors inherent in the online mode, the context, or the teachers themselves. Understanding such complexity, especially the drawbacks of OTPD, is necessary for the creation of quality online learning experiences for a wider population of teachers.

Since such insight is believed to be most useful if gauged from teachers' perspective (Torff, 2018), the next section will selectively review the empirical studies on teachers' attitudes in the teacher education field.

### **Teacher Attitude towards PD**

The term *attitude* is defined in mainstream psychology as a person's general and enduring evaluation of and feeling about a person/group/object/concept (Kazdin, 2000). As such, it extends along a dimension ranging from positive (values) to negative (prejudice) and

exerts a substantial influence on the behaviors one enacts towards such a person/group/object/concept (Kazdin, 2000).

In the teacher education field, teacher attitude has similarly been considered a single factor that shapes teachers' PD participation and determines the outcome of a TPD initiative (Torff, 2018). Researchers have thus devised scales to measure teacher attitude towards PD and identified variables that predict it. The attitude measurement studies have decomposed teacher attitude into four measurable components: (i) the perceived importance of TPD; (ii) the perceived benefits of TPD; (iii) the enjoyment of learning experience; and (iv) the behavior tendency (Stan et al., 2013; Torff & Byrnes, 2011; Torff & Sessions, 2009). Using quantitative surveys, researchers identified teaching experience (Stan et al., 2013; Torff et al., 2005) and grade level (Torff et al., 2005) as predictors of a teacher's PD attitude; the more experienced a teacher is and the higher grade s/he teaches, the less amenable s/he becomes with PD opportunities. Such relationships, however, cease to be statistically significant among those with more than 10 years of teaching experience (Torff et al., 2005).

The above literature offers a useful theoretical framework to investigate the "teacher PD attitude" construct, and implies several obstacles to a teacher's professional development such as the perceived importance of PD, or the unsuitable timing of a PD initiative. It is nonetheless limited in the predominantly quantitative nature of the empirical studies available. As such, the literature is deemed lacking in in-depth insights into teachers' PD attitude and may have overlooked important obstacles to PD that can be inferred from teachers' perspectives.

### **Teacher Attitude towards OTPD**

Research that investigates teacher attitude in an online TPD context is fairly scant. The only six studies that the authors were able to locate feature attempts to measure the construct, to identify the variables that predict teachers' OTPD attitude, and to suggest factors that limit teachers' participation in web-based professional development.

The studies that measure teachers' attitudes towards technology-assisted PD reported overall favorable scores (Kao & Tsai, 2009; Kao, Tsai, & Shih, 2014; Wasserman & Migdal, 2019). The Teacher OTPD Attitude construct is furthermore operationalized into five constituents: (i) perceived ease of use, (ii) intended behavior, (iii) perceived usefulness, (iv) anxiety, and (v) affection (Kao & Tsai, 2009; Kao, Tsai, & Shih, 2014). Alternatively, the construct was gauged through teachers' evaluation of (a) course effectiveness and application (b) learning environment (c) attitudes towards ICT, and (d) course assignments (Wasserman & Migdal, 2019). Compared to the breakdowns of "teacher' attitude towards PD", those of "teachers' attitude towards online PD" can be seen to put more emphasis on the emotional aspect (anxiety and affection) and to have added one more factor regarding the system characteristic (perceived ease of use). This may be attributed to the essential role that technology plays in web-based professional development (Truong & Murray, 2019), and the fact that teachers' confidence with computer use has been found to significantly affect their technology usage (Kao, Tsai, & Shih, 2014). This also suggests a domain-specific feature of the teacher attitude construct, i.e. its components vary across the context in which it is investigated.

Variables found to predict teachers' attitude towards OTPD include teachers' self-efficacy (Kao & Tsai, 2009; Kao, Tsai, & Shih, 2014), and teachers' belief about the consequences of web-based learning (Kao & Tsai, 2009). Specifically, teachers' confidence in online interactions and ICT applications positively correlates with the level of favorability in teachers' attitude, and so does the strength of their belief in the usefulness of online learning for their PD. Although useful in explaining teachers' attitudes towards OTPD, these findings do not necessarily reflect the obstacles facing teachers in online training courses.

The studies that explicitly inferred hindrances to OTPD from data pertaining to teachers' attitudes revealed three groups of challenges, namely course features, teachers' mindsets and adaptability, and technology availability. The first barrier, *course features*, included three aspects: time consumption, course design, and interactions. Most English language teachers in Hunt-Barron et al.'s study (2015) felt "overwhelmed" and "pressed" for time when using blogs in a PD course. In another report, O'Bannon et al. (2013) attributed participants' unsatisfactory completions of some online learning tasks to the fact that such activities were not mandated in the course design. Due to their often asynchronous nature, online interactions are furthermore reported to provide less support for social presence (i.e. opportunities to socialize) and social reality (i.e. quality of exchanged information) than face-to-face counterparts (Anderson & Kanuka, 1997). Concerning *teachers' mindsets* as an obstacle to OPTD, Wegerif (1998) warned that many learners may feel like outsiders to the online community of practice, which is usually massive and comprises people they do not personally know. Online courses, meanwhile, are found to only work for those who can cross this threshold and become insiders of such a community (Wegerif, 1998). In the same vein, teachers who hold a reserved mindset about evaluating strangers' work or exposing theirs to a large readership also found online interactions a real challenge (Hunt-Barron et al., 2015; O'Bannon et al., 2013). The next obstacle, teachers' *adaptability*, included self-regulation skills, prior knowledge, and experience with OTPD. Teachers with limited ability to regulate their learning were found to benefit little from web-based professional development (Chen, Chen, & Tsai, 2009); and teachers' unfamiliarity with technology-mediated learning is reported to explain their reluctance to participate in an online training course (O'Bannon et al., 2013). Finally, OTPD is understandably an unfavorable option for teachers from areas with inadequate *availability and quality of digital tools* (Hunt-Barron et al., 2015). These findings are generated via a variety of research approaches, from purely quantitative (Wasserman & Migdal, 2019) or qualitative (Wegerif, 1998), to mixed-methods (the other four studies).

In summary, the current literature on teachers' OTPD attitude has confirmed, enriched, and even challenged the larger literature on the obstacles of OTPD. Similar to common beliefs, technology availability poses a major challenge to online teacher training. Teachers' mindsets, however, have never been mentioned as an obstacle to OTPD in the broader literature. Some factors, such as lack of school support, while posing a concern to scholars as a possible drawback of OTPD, are not reported in any available empirical studies, and thus left open for confirmation. This strengthens the importance of empirical research on the downsides of OTPD through the lens of teacher attitude as mentioned earlier.

The literature, nonetheless, demonstrates several substantive gaps. First, with six empirical studies present (at least to the best of our knowledge), it is limited in volume.

Second, the literature has not specifically targeted EFL teachers participating in online language training. Unique difficulties exclusively facing these groups, therefore, are yet to be uncovered. Each of the available studies, furthermore, has investigated teachers' attitudes towards the use of a specific web tool. Their findings, therefore, might not have covered all the possible challenges inherent in OTPD more broadly. Methodologically, the current literature features the dominance of the quantitative approach. Most studies either rely purely on statistical analysis of questionnaire responses or sporadically use qualitative data only to support the primary quantitative findings. The only study that can be considered purely qualitative (Wegerif, 1998) was conducted unfortunately more than two decades ago. Such a lack of up-to-date qualitative accounts may mean a potential deficit in the current picture of teacher OTPD attitude since quantitative tools often depend on a list of readily available answers and allow limited flexibility for ideas uncovered in the existing literature to emerge. Finally, no studies have been conducted in contexts where technology-assisted TPD is still in its infancy as in Vietnam. The current study, which qualitatively investigates Vietnamese EFL teachers' attitudes towards a particular OTPD initiative and online training in general, is deemed a timely and relevant response to these gaps.

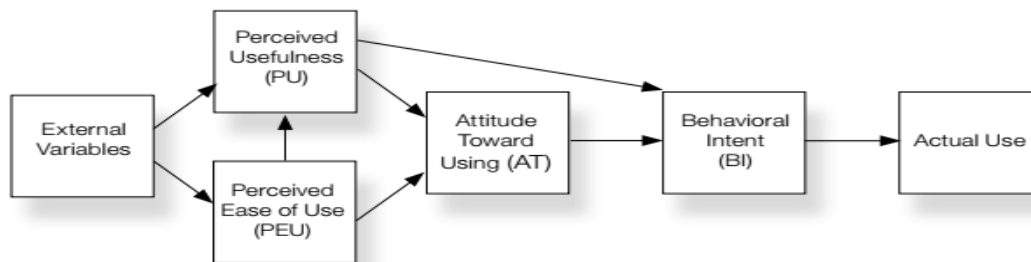
### Technology Acceptance Model (TAM)

The study employs the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM), introduced by Davis (1989), as the theoretical framework to guide the collection and analysis of its empirical data.

TAM (presented in Figure 1) is a theoretical model that explains how users would come to accept and use a given technology. The model suggests that users' decision to adopt or reject a particular information technology may be influenced by several psychological factors, notably *their attitudes* towards using, the *perceived usefulness* (i.e. "the degree to which a person believes that using a particular system would enhance his or her job performance"), and the *perceived ease of use* (i.e. "the degree to which a person believes that using a particular technology would be free from effort") (Davis, 1989, p. 320). Putting users' attitudes at the center of the picture, the model also acknowledges the role of environment (external variables) as the cause of users' beliefs and attitudes, thereby exerting an indirect influence on their acceptance of the technology in question.

Figure 1

*Technology Acceptance Model (TAM)* (Davis, 1989, as cited in Holden & Rada, 2011, p. 344)



Although other relevant theories are available (e.g. the Theory of Reasoned Action by Ajzen and Fishbein, 1980; or Diffusion of Innovations theory by Rogers, 2003), TAM serves as an optimal theoretical framework for the present study for three reasons. First, the model particularly targets technology usage, thus is immediately applicable to the scope of this study. Second, TAM provides a comprehensive framework for investigating the influence of a person's attitude on his/her technology-related behaviors. Specifically, not only does TAM highlight the causal relationship between these two variables, but it also specifies factors that may explain a person's attitude towards a given technology, such as the external environment, or the internally perceived usefulness. Applied to this study, this information suggests that data about the immediate context such as course design, or teachers' thoughts on course usefulness be collected and analyzed to fully understand their attitudes towards OTPD. Finally, the relationships among the variables explicated in TAM have been tested and confirmed in a number of empirical research studies (E.g. Smith & Sivo, 2012; Wasserman & Migdal, 2019); and the use of TAM as a theoretical framework for OTPD research has been recommended by several others (e.g. Wasserman & Migdal, 2019).

## **Context**

As previously introduced, the study was contextualized in the English Discovery Online (EDO) course, an OTPD initiative added to the broader English language training program offered by Hanoi University within the framework of Project 2020 run by Vietnam MoET for in-service EFL instructors nationwide.

EDO was originally an asynchronous computer-based language learning program designed to enhance users' English proficiency. It is structured in 10 sub-courses, encompassing different English proficiency levels and all language skills. With the assistance of various educational technologies and resources such as self-assessment tools, online library, discussion forum, the entire EDO contents are supposed to be deliverable in virtual mode (Edusoft, 2012).

Adopted in Project 2020, EDO was a purely online TPD intervention. Participating teachers were required, over three months and in their own time, to complete at least 80% of the course content that suits their level. Extracurricular activities such as joining a group discussion are advisable but not mandatory. All these combined would add approximately 150 flexible e-learning hours to the broader English language training program, and were thus expected to alleviate the time constraint issue facing Project 2020 participants (Pham, 2012; Parks, 2011).

## **Research questions**

Given the above literature and context, and adhering to the Technology Acceptance Model (Davis, 1989), the study seeks answers to two research questions:

- (1) What are Vietnamese EFL teachers' attitudes towards EDO and Online Teacher Professional Development?

(2) What obstacles to OTPD can be inferred from the reported attitudes?

## Method

The study employs a qualitative research approach, collecting data via semi-structured interviews to answer the research questions. The qualitative research approach is appropriate for the study, which aims to seek local understanding rather than global truth (Cresswell, 2014; Johnson & Christensen, 2014), and to discover potentially new aspects of “teacher OTPD attitude” that the current quantitative-oriented literature has not yet covered. The interview design particularly helps the study achieve this aim by yielding rich and detailed insights into the teacher attitude construct (*ibid.*). Allowing participants to freely voice their thoughts, in-depth conversations with participants may encourage them to reveal different aspects of their attitude towards OTPD, the reasons behind it, thereby assisting the researchers to also probe the difficulties facing OTPD attendees.

The data collection tool, the interview, comprised two groups of questions. The first gathered teachers’ evaluations of EDO as an OTPD option. The second, more extended, and the main part of the conversation, elicited in-depth information about their views towards OTPD more generally. Being semi-structured, the interview questions were guided by TAM and the reviewed literature, but still allowed a certain level of freedom for the conversations “to develop in unexpected directions” where new areas not yet mentioned in the literature might emerge (Richards, 2009, p. 186). Specifically, the interview includes both main content questions that are applied to all participants (e.g. “What are your obstacles when attending EDO?”) and probes that invite elaborations from participants on a case-by-case basis (e.g. “You said you liked EDO because of the course content, can you elaborate?”)

Research participants included 19 EFL teachers, who joined the study voluntarily, from 17 primary, secondary, and tertiary schools in the north of Vietnam. The sample size is deemed sufficient for the study as the data provided by them were deemed saturated (Dörnyei, 2007). By the interview time, all respondents had completed at least two thirds (equivalent to at least 100 learning hours) of their required EDO course content.

Each interview lasted around 1 hour, and was conducted via phone by the first author in Vietnamese to help participants fully and conveniently communicate their intentions. All conversations were recorded, then transcribed verbatim, before being translated into English for analysis. The whole data collection process took place over two months, was endorsed by Macquarie University Research Ethics Committee, and received written consent from participants before implementation.

The data (English interview transcripts) were thematically analyzed, following the procedure prescribed in Murray (2009). First, the researchers read and made sense of the whole data set, and identified segments of data that are relevant to the research questions. Codes were then determined and “tagged” to all these segments, which can be single words, phrases, or full sentences. The same codes were assigned to segments that convey similar meanings, while new codes were created for segments that do not fit any available codes. The step after whole-data coding was “categorization”, which involved the researchers



comparing across all the codes and pulling together related codes to form categories. Finally, themes emerging from the categories were examined in light of the research questions. To ensure participants' privacy, pseudonyms are used in the entire paper.

## Results

Overall, the responses revealed a wide range of opinions. At one end were the teachers who strongly favored online PD to its face-to-face counterpart; at the other were those who considered OTPD useful, but only secondary and complementary to learning from live interactions with others. Guided by TAM as the theoretical framework, relevant data segments from the interviews were grouped into four categories: the "perceived benefits", "perceived obstacles", "personal feelings" and "behavioral response tendency", which are presented in turns below.

### Perceived benefits

In response to the question of why teachers would choose OTPD, all 19 participants valued the practical convenience of online learning. They highlighted the *flexible and easy accessibility*, which entails *financial gains* (n=6) and *increased participation* in continuing PD (n=1).

Lua: I don't have much time, I **like** the advantage of being able to learn **whenever** I open my computer. That's the reason why I may choose OTPD. [Excerpt 1]

Hanh: The first reason is that face-to-face classes are usually fixed in schedule while online learning is **so flexible**. Learners can choose **anytime** they want to study, morning or midnight. Online learning also **saves** them many things, like fuel cost, because they don't have to travel to class, or **regular income**, because they can learn and **still keep their job** at the same time. [Excerpt 2]

Dung: **Time arrangement for face-to-face** courses is very **difficult**. [...] We have so many other things to consider, financial conditions, travelling, family. It is difficult for face-to-face classes to make us volunteer, but **online ones can** do it in some way. For example, a school may buy it for its teachers. [...] They then can learn **whenever** there is internet connection. This will **encourage** their **active participation**. [Excerpt 3]

The second benefit of OTPD was determined to be *learner autonomy* according to six participants. Five of them associated autonomy in OTPD to their freedom to choose what and how to learn:

Hai: I think we **don't have to** go to class and follow the **arrangement** of the teachers. With online learning, I **can choose** when to learn and **what to learn**. [Excerpt 4]

Thang: When learning online, I can listen to a sentence for **as many times as I want to**. [Excerpt 5]

One teacher interestingly viewed the independence she had in online learning as a way of saving her face:

Thuy: If there are things I cannot ask anyone, I **can always** open the computer and log onto my online course to **look up**. That's another advantage. Online learning also **really helps** when I **feel too shy** to ask others or do not know how to ask. [Excerpt 6]

The interviews also revealed positive attitudes of the participants towards the *quality* and *relevance* of OTPD courses. The common highlights centered around the *learning materials* (n=6), *the nature of content* (n=4), and *the learning aid* (n=4). Notably, some teachers (n=3) stressed their belief in the “*standard*” of OTPD course content as it involves English native speakers.

Thuy: It is a **huge** source of knowledge that's **always available** for me to refer to. [Excerpt 7]

Thang: I think face-to-face class is **not as effective as online**. [...] I will **not develop all four skills**, yes, because face-to-face classes are not systematic. For example, I may have up to five lessons per week but each of them is focused on only one skill and cannot cover all the skills at the same time. Face-to-face class has many students while there is only one CD player, **the facility** is not good enough. The quality, for example, **sound quality** of online courses is better. Plus, teachers' **pronunciation** in face-to-face class is usually not standard. [Excerpt 8]

Thoa: The content is good, and is **prepared by the native speakers**, so is **usually accurate**. Face-to-face classes are normally taught by Vietnamese instructors and this cannot be as **standard** as online courses. [Excerpt 9]

Bich: The information and language is very **up-to-date**. I can **apply** what I learn **immediately** to my daily life. [Excerpt 10]

## Perceived obstacles

Besides the above advantages, the interviewed teachers also shared their opinions about the downsides of pursuing PD via online courses; it should be noted, however, that the obstacles were mentioned much less frequently in the data than the benefits.

The first reported disadvantage is the *negative side of learner autonomy*. According to one participant, being allowed to work at her own time and pace could generate negative feelings and habits such as boredom and passiveness:

Phuong: Learning English online is **quite passive**. [...] Online learning requires learners to be really **proactive** in their learning, **otherwise**, they will not learn much from it. It is also sometimes **quite boring** to study alone with online courses. [Excerpt 11]

Some participants (n=3) perceived the *lack of instant and in-depth feedback* and *live interaction* with instructors and peers as a factor that could limit their learning outcome in an online learning environment. Two participants said:

Tam: I **like** going to classes **to communicate** with the instructors, and if I have any questions, I can ask them to explain **right away** [...] and I can understand **on the spot**. Learning online allows me to ask but I **have to wait** before receiving an answer from the instructor. [Excerpt 12]

Thang: I still **prefer** learning with a **physical instructor** because I **can ask** my instructor why and how questions **whenever** I have one. [Excerpt 13]

Another perceived hindrance for teachers pursuing OTPD emerging from the interviews was its **dependence on users' information and technological (IT) skills** and **technology availability**. As one participant put it,

Thang: Many people choose to study online; but this **requires internet connection** and **quality of computers**. [...]. One more thing is that we **need to have skills to use software**. I remember the first time I participated in an online course, I did not know very well the way to run the programs, so I did not know how to perform certain activities, how to send assignments, and had to ask the technical staff for support. I think this also **affects** people's participation. [Excerpt 14]

### Personal feelings

The above perceptions of OTPD generated generally positive feelings about both EDO and OPTD more broadly among the interviewed teachers. Lua found OTPD *interesting and useful* while Tam felt more *relaxed* and *less stressed* when studying online. With EDO, the reported feelings were even more positive. Most participants (n=14) rated EDO 8 and higher in the scale of 0 to 10 (with 0 being unsatisfactory and 10 being very satisfactory). To illustrate, one teacher described her satisfaction with EDO as follows:

Puong: I love it a lot. I would give it **9** I think, **definitely**. [...] I remember when I could not do it on my PC, I even brought my laptop to Hanoi University and got it fixed there. You can imagine how **keen** I am on it. [Excerpt 15]

It is, however, quite interesting to note the participants' preference when they compared OTPD with its face-to-face counterpart. Although the perceived benefits of OTPD outnumbered the perceived drawbacks as previously presented, as many as eight teachers explicitly indicated a favor of face-to-face TPD courses. Explaining their choices, those teachers tended to stress the importance of live interactions with course instructors as the main reason:

Thuong: If I have a chance to study with a **physical teacher**, I **prefer** that, because I have a chance to **ask** my questions **directly, communicate** with them to improve my speaking and listening skills. [Excerpt 16]

Tinh: I **prefer face-to-face**. [...] When I encounter some difficult tasks, I can switch off my computer, but I can definitely **ask** my **friends** and **teachers** in face-to-face classes for help with the difficult tasks. [Excerpt 17]

Thang: I still **prefer** learning with a **physical instructor** [...] **Live instructors** can teach me many interesting things **outside the course content**. They sometimes also provide me with **examples of good teachers** to learn from. I just **feel like learning with a good teacher** rather than a good machine. [Excerpt 18]

Only six interviewees showed an absolute preference to the online model, and the most frequently mentioned reason was the convenience of flexible accessibility, as can be seen in the sample explanation below:

Dung: I think **online learning is better** because I can learn **anytime** while face-to-face class needs syllabus and **fixed schedule**, and requires learners to travel. [Excerpt 19]

### **Behavioral response tendency**

At the end of the interviews, all the participating teachers were asked to rate their willingness to recommend EDO to other colleagues and to utilize OTDP in the future.

All 19 participants said they would share the information about EDO. One emphasized:

Thoa: I **even advertised** it to my colleagues in Thanh Hoa when I came back to my hometown last month. I talk about it whenever I have a chance. I am **trying** to find a way to purchase an account to study with it on a long-term basis. [Excerpt 20]

As for their personal use, four interviewees expressed a complete willingness, i.e. they would volunteer to join OTPD even if they had to pay. Thoa, for instance, insisted that she wanted to participate in similar courses and that money would not be a concern. Fifteen other interviewed teachers expressed the likelihood of future use of OTPD, but under certain conditions, including reasonable cost (n=11), more challenging content (n=2), more reasonable timing (n=3), and an absence of excessive assessment pressure (n=1). The last condition, for instance, is evident in this teacher's description of her future OTPD usage intention:

Tam: **Yes, definitely**. I am usually willing to learn, **as long as** there is **not much pressure** from the exam and **assessment**, which can "shake" my psychology. [Excerpt 21]

## **Discussion**

### **Research question 1**

The first research question in this study aims to depict 19 participating teachers' attitudes towards OTPD. The data showed an overall welcoming reception, although the extent of approval varied across the sample.

The shared reason behind the common positivity expressed by the respondents is the convenience of online learning, as has been widely acknowledged in the literature (e.g. Nunan, 2012; Truong & Murray, 2019). The variation in the reported level of favor towards OTPD might be attributed to two possible parameters. The first, more obvious, may be the differences in the types and extent of difficulties facing each participant; that is, a participant experiencing more and greater issues with EDO would likely express a less positive attitude towards OTPD. The second reason may lie in the e-course's merits that are distinctly recognized by or uniquely applicable to only some individuals. The benefit related to course

content [Excerpt 9] and the face-saving effect of distance learning [Excerpt 6], for instance, is acknowledged by only three and one participants respectively. Surprisingly, the technology-enhanced learning aids, one clear advantage of online learning over face-to-face courses, are mentioned by only four interviewed teachers.

Although these benefits are not discoveries (see for example Nunan 2012), the way they are noticed by the participants as described above implies several important points to OTPD stakeholders. Firstly, convenience and flexibility alone clearly cannot guarantee OTPD superiority over its face-to-face counterpart. Teachers' acceptance of OTPD depends also on the presence of many other advantages, especially ones that are not typically accommodated in traditional courses, such as the involvement of native English language speakers in the course content. Secondly, not all the good points of OTPD, even the obvious one such as the technology-enhanced learning aids, are automatically known to users. Detailed user manuals, thorough pre-course orientations, and initial technical training are thus highly recommended to communicate all the possible benefits to teachers trainees before any OTPD initiative commences. Finally, some teachers did not mention certain benefits of OTPD possibly because they simply do not consider them as such. For instance, the quality of the learning materials [Excerpts 7, 10] in online courses are not commended on by 13 teachers, probably not because they are unaware of it, but rather because they may have found such in traditional courses equally updated, abundant, and useful. This situation (if happening) can be associated with the so-called "paradigm" cases previously described by Lankshear and Knobel (2007). Paradigm cases, as explained by these scholars, refer to a remarkable shift from traditional learning and teaching, as a result of web-based technology applications. The new version of learning and teaching we create, however, can simply be a digital replica of the old teaching and learning if the shift does not represent substantive changes in the way learners acquire new skills and knowledge. Learners, in this case, would have no strong cause to mobilize their conventional values, priorities, and sensibilities. Applied to this study, "paradigm" cases help to explain why all participants showed a positive evaluation of OTPD, but the level of positivity varies. Some interviewees would even opt for face-to-face options when asked to choose between online and traditional TPD modes.

One aspect of teacher attitude that has not been mentioned elsewhere in the literature emerged from the data: the perceived benefit that online courses can uniquely bring to the course content. As the results demonstrated, not only did participants attribute the "accurate" and "standard" quality of online courses to the involvement of "the native speakers" in content preparation and delivery, they also emphasized that such qualities are usually not as high in face-to-face classes [Experts 8, 9]. Benefits regarding course quality were already discussed in the online teacher education literature (e.g. Nunan, 2012); so too was "perceived usefulness" acknowledged as one integral part of teacher attitude towards OPD (e.g. Kao, Tsai, & Shih, 2014). Such "usefulness" as mentioned in the literature, however, has always denoted what e-learning has to offer to the participants' profession. Never has it referred to what online courses can uniquely offer to the course content. In this study, EDO is a language training course, and as such, it offers the distinctive benefit that the entire content is presented to users by English language native speakers. This finding, on the one hand, reinforces our previous comment on the domain-specific feature of the teacher attitude construct in the literature review section. On the other, it suggests researchers and course designers in other

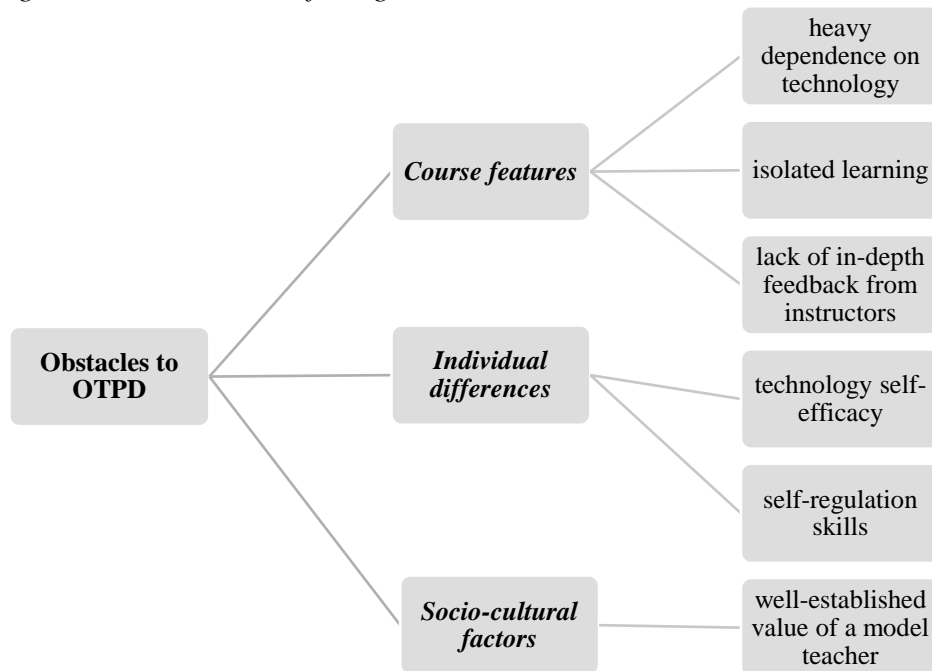
disciplines consider how the preparation and delivery of course content (e.g. science, or music) could be uniquely benefited (or otherwise hampered) by the online mode. At the theoretical level, the term “perceived usefulness” use in TAM and available scales to measure “teacher attitude towards OTPD” construct (Kao, Tsai, & Shih, 2014; Wasserman & Migdal, 2019) might be updated to include the degree to which teachers believe the use of online mode would uniquely enhance course content quality.

### Research question 2

The second research question aims to infer the obstacles facing EFL teachers when participating in online PD. The results are illustrated in Figure 2, which shows that hindrances to OTPD originate from three main sources, namely the course, the teacher trainees, and the socio-cultural features of the immediate context.

**Figure 2**

*Findings about the obstacles facing EFL teachers in OTPD*



Most of the findings as shown in Figure 2 are aligned with the current literature. The isolated and lonely nature of online learning, for instance, has been noted before by Nunan (2012), and O’Bannon et al. (2013). Others can easily be located in the literature previously presented.

It is surprising though to notice that several obstacles discussed or confirmed in the available literature do not appear in the above figure. The quality of online interactions (Anderson & Kanuka, 2006), the inconvenience of going public online (Hunt-Barron et al., 2015), the lack of school support (National Research Council, 2007), teachers’ doubt of

OTPD as a newly introduced PD model (*ibid.*), the time consumption issue of OTPD (Hunt-Barron et al., 2015) were not referred to in any way by the respondents.

Two explanations are possible for such absence. First, these factors, while perceived as challenges in OTPD by teachers or scholars in other contexts, were not experienced as such by the teachers participating in this study. Lack of school support, for instance, might not be a problem for all 19 teachers because their participation in EDO was endorsed by their schools' managerial boards. Second, some respondents in this study might not have experienced OTPD long enough to be fully aware of all the possible challenges. Although all participants had completed at least 100 hours of EDO at the time of interviews, the course might have been the first encounter with online language training for some teachers, so they possibly did not notice, for example, how time-consuming it might be compared to a face-to-face alternative. Of these two, the second explanation is more likely to apply to most absent obstacles, given the fact that online courses have not been a popular TPD model offered for Vietnamese teachers. This, if the case, implies one possible obstacle related to teachers' inexperience with OTPD that has not been mentioned in the literature; that is, teachers' unawareness of the possible challenges facing them when going online for professional development. Initial training was advised to focus on the positive course features (Truong & Murray, 2019); it is now, based on this finding, also recommended raising teachers' awareness of all possible difficulties they may have when joining OTPD.

The most novel part of the findings might be the socio-cultural obstacle group. In the study, the participants demonstrated that they strongly valued a good teacher in a traditional class. According to them, not only can classroom teachers respond immediately to their requests, teach them useful content outside the course texts [Excerpts 16, 17, 18], they may also provide a good example of educators for the trainees to learn from. Such respect for educators normally exists in Confucian cultures (Vietnam included) and represents a considerable obstacle for both OTPD course designers and trainees to overcome, because as one participant put it, he felt a natural feeling of favor towards a traditional class because of such a well-established value [Except 18]. In other words, the improvement of OTPD to gain users' acceptance should involve "not just adjusting the technical configuration and delivery"; the process should involve "challenging the social norms and practices [...] as well" (Lamb, 2004, p. 45). Some band-aid fixes to satisfy users' preference for a live teacher can be the involvement of facilitators, or inclusions of synchronous features into asynchronous online courses like EDO to allow participants chances to interact with their "teachers"; but long-term solutions would be the incorporation of more unique benefits into OTPD to compensate for the lack of live instructors.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, the study has advanced our understanding of teachers' attitudes towards online teacher professional development and the obstacles inherent in this modern mode of teacher training.

The findings suggest that teacher attitude is a domain-specific construct, and the perceived benefits that the online mode may bring to the course content also underpin

teachers' views of OTPD. It is also evident that when teachers show a positive attitude toward OTPD, it does not necessarily mean that they would choose it over the traditional alternative.

Obstacles that OTPD course designers and potential attendees need to overcome include both generic factors such as technology availability, course features, or teachers' technology efficacy, as well as context-specific ones such as the respect for educators that is rooted in a Confucian culture like Vietnam. The introduction of online training to the PD route of teachers of English or any other subject should involve not only technical design, or course materials development, but also understanding and challenging of the social norms well-established in the immediate community.

Limitations of the study necessarily lie in its scope, theoretical framework, and data collection technique. Had it been conducted on a larger scale, in a different context, with the application of a different theoretical framework, and/or more sources of data, additional insights into teachers' attitudes towards OTPD and its obstacles may have been obtained. Future researchers are therefore advised to duplicate this study in another context (a synchronous OTPD course for example) with teachers of other disciplines or study the same research questions but with a data triangulation technique, or under another theoretical framework.

Despite these limitations though, the current study has demonstrated the power of qualitative research approach in exploring a psychological construct and added one more in-depth account of teacher OTPD attitude to the currently scant literature featuring the dominance of quantitative research studies. The findings are potentially valuable for all involved in OTPD - course designers, administrators, teachers, who seek to minimise the obstacles and maximise the benefits of this increasingly prevalent PD mode.

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