

Investigating Vietnamese EFL Teachers' Learning Outcomes from a Professional Development Course

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ABSTRACT

This study investigated how Vietnamese EFL teachers learned from a professional development training course and what knowledge they gained. Using a mixed-methods design, data were collected from 37 teachers through a questionnaire and from four teachers via semi-structured interviews. Based on Garet et al.'s (2001) four dimensions of active learning: (1) observing and being observed, (2) planning classroom implementation, (3) reviewing students' work, and (4) presenting, leading, and writing, the findings indicated moderate learning across all domains. Teachers reported improved ability to apply Communicative, Task-Based, and Project-Based approaches, supported by peer collaboration, expert feedback, and reflective activities. The results highlight that professional development is most effective when it promotes active, context-sensitive, and collaborative learning. The study provides insights for designing sustainable EFL teacher training programs aligned with Vietnam's current educational reforms.

Keywords: professional development, EFL teacher training, teacher learning

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Introduction

Professional development (PD) has become a key element of education reform in many parts of the world (Asterhan & Lefstein, 2024; Wang & Li, 2025). PD allows teachers to refresh their pedagogical knowledge, address the evolving needs of students, and develop lifelong learning, reflection, collaboration, and innovative practices (Borg, 2018; Mardi et al., 2026; Żammit, 2025). Recent literature suggests that successful PD is not limited to simple knowledge transfer and should encourage active engagement, teacher autonomy, reflective investigation, and context-based pedagogy (Asterhan & Lefstein, 2024; Fernandes et al., 2023; Wang & Li, 2025). In EFL teaching, training courses remain an important yet heavily criticized means of improving teachers' professional competence, especially when teachers need to adopt new pedagogy in their local classrooms (Garet et al., 2001; Novozhenina & López Pinzón, 2018; Wang & Li, 2025).

In Vietnam, the government has prioritized teacher professional development (TPD) as part of its effort to make education more internationally compatible. With communicative competence designated as the key objective for learning English in the 2018 General Education Program, learner-centered, competency-based pedagogy is encouraged. In addition, with the implementation of new language tests that meet the criteria set out in the Vietnamese Six-level Foreign Language Proficiency Framework (Ministry of Education and Training, 2018), it is essential to develop a professionally trained foreign language teaching faculty. However, although prior research has explored teachers' perceptions of the effectiveness of PD and characteristics of effective PD programs (Fernandes et al., 2023; Miller & Hamada, 2025; T. V. Nguyen,

2023; Yalçın Arslan, 2019), there has been little exploration of how EFL teachers learn from short-term PD courses and what knowledge they gain and employ.

To address this gap, this study examines the learning experiences of EFL teachers in a training course offered in Vietnam's Mekong Delta region. Based on Garet et al.'s (2001) conceptualization of active learning in professional development, particularly: (1) *observing and being observed*, (2) *planning classroom implementation*, (3) *reviewing students' work*, and (4) *presenting, leading, and writing* as an analytical framework to investigate how teachers engage, reflect, and apply new knowledge of pedagogy to practice, this study aims to answer the following two research questions:

1. To what extent did Vietnamese EFL teachers learn from the training course?
2. What specific knowledge and skills did they acquire through participation in the course?

Literature Review

TPD as Reflective and Situated Teacher Learning

TPD is regarded as an indispensable factor in any educational reform (Asterhan & Lefstein, 2024; Hai & Linh, 2022; Wang & Li, 2025). TPD should not be considered merely the transfer of knowledge from experts to teachers (Cirocki & Farrell, 2019; Fernandes et al., 2023; Mardi et al., 2026). Instead, it is considered a continuum of learning experiences that develop teachers' professional knowledge and skills (Darling-

Hammond et al., 2017; Desimone, 2009; Johnson & Golombek, 2016). In addition, TPD is a reflective, collaborative, and contextual process (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017; Guo et al., 2025; Yalçın Arslan, 2019), during which teachers build professional knowledge through interaction with theory, practice, colleagues, and teaching contexts (Johnson & Golombek, 2016; Mardi et al., 2026; Yalçın Arslan, 2019).

The importance of PD is obvious, since teachers have to implement policy changes while interpreting and adapting them to personal and local requirements. To achieve successful change in education, teacher agency is required (Wang & Li, 2025), and professional learning communities facilitate collaborative work (Christensen & Jerrim, 2025). In EFL education, curricula, methods, assessment, and technologies continue to develop (Borg, 2018). Hence, PD has to help teachers acquire new knowledge and adjust it to local teaching conditions.

Reflection is also crucial in teacher development, as it enables the analysis of teachers' practice, the recognition of problems, the revision of teachers' beliefs, and the making of better pedagogical decisions (Farrell & Farrell, 2025; Richards & Farrell, 2005; Thida & Yang, 2026). Reflective techniques, including classroom observation, analysis of critical incidents, keeping journals, videotaping, self-monitoring, and conducting action research, can link theory and practice (Farrell & Farrell, 2025; Koni & Lepp, 2024; Theint et al., 2021). This means that teacher development courses will be most useful when theoretical input is accompanied by experiential learning and collaboration in class.

Forms and Effectiveness of PD in EFL Contexts

PD can be either short-term through workshop courses and in-service education or long-term through graduate education, mentoring, classroom inquiry, and professional learning communities (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017). While short-term PD seeks to bring teachers up to date on their methodology, the long-term influence can be limited by a lack of reflection, application, mentoring, and support (Asterhan & Lefstein, 2024; Darling-Hammond et al., 2017; Desimone, 2009). On the contrary, the focus of long-term PD is on continuation, cooperation, empowerment, and professional identity formation (Johnson & Golombek, 2016; Olin et al., 2020; Roberts, 1998).

In Vietnam, both short-term and long-term PD have supported curriculum innovation (Bui & H. T. M. Nguyen, 2016), communicative language teaching (CLT) (Bui & H. T. M. Nguyen, 2016; Le, 2019), assessment reform (Ngo & Tran, 2024; X. N. C. M. Nguyen & V. H. Nguyen, 2019), and teachers' research and professional skills (Ngo & Tran, 2024; X. N. C. M. Nguyen & V. H. Nguyen, 2019). Such an aspect is particularly crucial in EFL education in Vietnam, where teachers need to undertake reforms focused on CLT and competencies under time pressure, with large numbers of students and within examination systems (Bui & H. T. M. Nguyen, 2016; Ngo & Tran, 2024; X. N. C. M. Nguyen & V. H. Nguyen, 2019).

Effective PD comprises content emphasis, active learning, coherence, time, and collective participation (Asterhan & Lefstein, 2024; Darling-Hammond et al., 2017; Desimone, 2009; Garet et al., 2001). These are enhanced through observation, discussion, planning, experimenting, and reflection (Guo et al., 2025; Yalçın Arslan,

2019; Yumru, 2015), involving collaborative planning, practical experience, relevance, mentoring, and institutional support (Cirocki & Farrell, 2019; Dang et al., 2023), especially in EFL contexts, including Asian settings (Cirocki & Farrell, 2019; Guo et al., 2025; Yumru, 2015). PD is better explained from the perspective of a situated learning process determined by pedagogic, sociocultural, and institutional aspects (Borg, 2018; Dang et al., 2023). While there has been much research on PD design and outcomes, teachers' involvement in PD and the learning they have received in the short term have not received much attention, especially in EFL reform settings, where implementation of PD is very difficult (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017; Desimone & Garet, 2015; Novozhenina & López Pinzón, 2018).

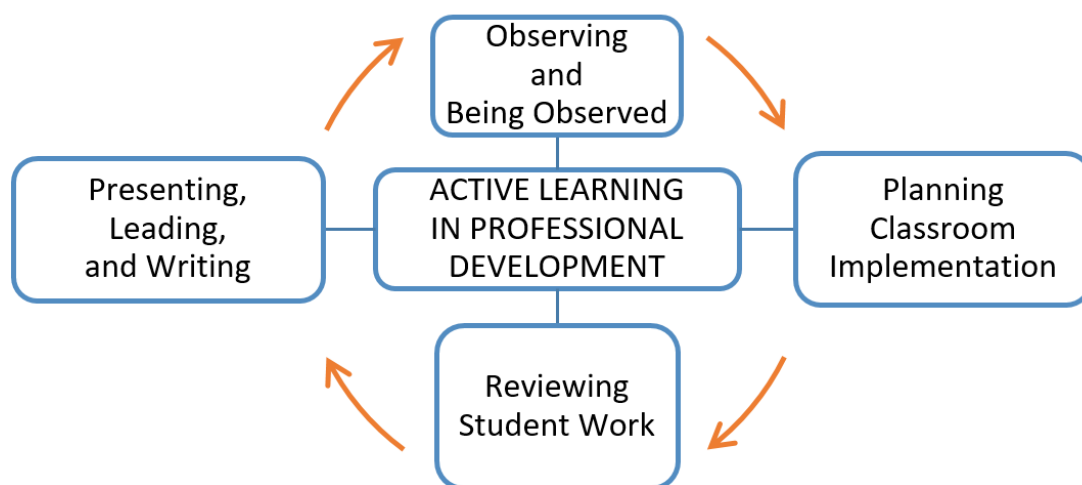
Theoretical Framework: Active Learning in PD

This study uses Garet et al.'s (2001) four dimensions of active learning as a theoretical lens to explore how teachers were actively engaged in the training process and constructed professional knowledge. Although the training course was not structured around these four dimensions of active learning, the framework is useful for interpreting teachers' accounts of their learning processes.

As stated by Garet et al. (2001), active teacher engagement, rather than passive information receipt, is considered effective PD. The four interconnected aspects of PD, which include (1) *observing and being observed*, (2) *planning for classroom implementation*, (3) *reviewing student work*, and (4) *presenting, leading, and writing*, are identified as active

Figure 1

Framework of the Study



learning for teachers. The first aspect focuses on learning from observation and feedback; the second on applying new knowledge in the classroom through planning and dialogue; the third on student production as evidence for pedagogical reflection; and the fourth on articulation, collaboration, and reflective communication in learning consolidation.

These four dimensions of active learning are pertinent to the current study because they encompass both the process and the content of teacher learning in PD. The dimensions are consistent with socio-cultural and constructivist approaches to teacher learning, which view teacher learning as a process of social interaction, reflection, and meaning-making (Koni & Lepp, 2024; Richards & Farrell, 2005; Vygotsky, 1978). In other words, it is not only the teachers' participation in a learning session but also their ability to observe, adjust, examine, and share knowledge that matters.

Description of the PD Course

The PD course, conducted from October 2017 to January 2018, aimed to enhance the teaching abilities of English teachers by presenting theoretical concepts, planning, and implementation. The course introduced teachers to prominent teaching theories, particularly the Engage-Study-Activate (ESA) model and language skills teaching strategies, which enabled teachers to gain both conceptual and practical knowledge.

One of the most important aspects of the course was practice-based learning. Teachers collaborated to develop lesson plans, implement lesson plans, and participate in simulated teaching activities, with peer and trainer feedback. Following the training, some teachers implemented lesson plans at their respective

institutions, which were observed by trainers and peers using feedback forms designed to focus on lesson plans, class engagement, interaction, and instruction. These observation and feedback processes were intended to connect training inputs with classroom practices and enable reflective practice.

Methodology

Research Design

A sequential explanatory mixed-methods research design was used in this study to answer the research questions. In the first part, quantitative data were collected using the questionnaire to identify patterns in teachers' perceived learning gains in the course. In the second part, qualitative data were gathered by way of semi-structured interviews to provide explanations and elaborations on the results from the first part of the study, especially in relation to how teachers understood, utilized, and analyzed their learning gains from the course.

Participants

Participants included 37 teachers from Vietnam who had all taken part in the same PD training organized by MOET and were selected through convenience sampling. Four teachers who responded to the questionnaire were selected for an interview to explain the results of the quantitative analysis. For confidentiality purposes, the four interviewees were assigned the pseudonyms Remy, Brandon, Albee, and Julia.

Since the study was exploratory and aimed at describing participants' experiences, a small sample size could be justified in terms of the need for pattern recognition rather than broad generalization (Hair et al., 2013).

Table 1*Study Participants*

Category	Details
Teaching Level	Secondary and High Schools
Teaching Experience	3-15 years
Gender	28 Females, 9 Males
Qualification	Bachelor's or Master's in English Language Teaching

Instrument

Two instruments were deployed in this study: (1) a five-point Likert-type scale questionnaire aimed at measuring the level of teacher learning on four dimensions of active learning, and (2) a semi-structured interview aimed at exploring how teachers applied and reflected on the knowledge they gained from the course. The interview guide was designed to correspond to the four dimensions identified by Garet et al. (2001).

Data Collection Procedures

Before the main data collection, the questionnaire was piloted with 20 EFL teachers to check its clarity, relevance, and reliability. Internal consistency was measured using Cronbach's alpha. In exploratory research, coefficients of .70 or higher are commonly considered acceptable (Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994). However, values between .60 and .70 may still be acceptable when newly developed constructs are being measured or when instruments are used in less familiar contexts (Hair et al., 2013). The reliability analysis results are presented in Table 2.

To strengthen the qualitative instrument, two experts in language teacher education reviewed the interview questions for relevance and alignment with the analytical framework.

Table 2*Reliability Analysis*

Domain	α	Interpretation
Observing and being observed	0.69	Acceptable
Planning classroom implementation	0.82	Good
Reviewing students' work	0.74	Acceptable
Presenting, leading, and writing	0.85	Good

Once this validation was completed, the questionnaire was administered to participants, and semi-structured interviews lasting approximately 45–60 minutes were conducted. Participation was voluntary, informed consent was obtained, and all responses were anonymized.

Data Analysis

Questionnaire data were analyzed using descriptive statistics in SPSS (version 22.0) to determine overall learning levels. Interview data were analyzed thematically using a deductive approach based on Garet et al.'s (2001) four dimensions of active learning. Transcripts were read repeatedly, coded, and grouped within these categories to interpret how teachers experienced and internalized the training content.

Findings

Quantitative Results

Quantitative data were analyzed using one sample *t*-test, paired-samples *t*-test, and independent-samples *t*-test.

Firstly, a Descriptive Statistics Test was run to investigate the average level of participants' learning in the training course demonstrated in the following table.

Table 3

Participants' Learning in the Training Course

Clusters	Min.	Max.	Mean	SD
Observing and being observed	2.20	5.00	3.7676	.61556
Planning classroom implementation	2.17	5.00	3.8018	.71991
Reviewing student work	2.80	5.00	3.7676	.61737
Presenting, leading, and writing	2.00	5.00	3.8108	.92309

Second, a one-sample *t*-test was conducted to examine whether the mean score of participants' learning ($M = 2.05$) differed from the test value of 2.5 (moderately acceptable level). The result revealed a significant difference ($t = -8.64$; $p < 0.01$), indicating that teachers' learning was at a reasonably acceptable level. Among the domains, observing and being observed, and reviewing student work were acceptable, suggesting that teachers were willing to engage in both observation processes and reflection on evidence of student learning during the training. Planning classroom implementation

was also acceptable, reflecting teachers' ability to prepare lesson plans suited to their teaching contexts. Similarly, presenting, leading, and writing were perceived as acceptable. Third, a paired-samples *t*-test was run to compare the four learning domains. The results showed no significant differences between observing and being observed and planning classroom implementation ($t = -3.84$; $p = 0.70$), nor between observing and being observed and reviewing student work ($t = 0.00$; $p = 1.00$), or observing and being observed and presenting, leading, and writing ($t = -3.60$; $p = 0.72$). Likewise, planning classroom implementation did not differ from reviewing student work ($t = 3.35$; $p = 0.74$) or presentation ($t = -0.72$; $p = 0.94$). These results indicate that teachers performed consistently across all domains, all at an acceptable level. These results indicate that teachers performed consistently across all domains, all at an acceptable level.

Finally, the independent-samples *t*-test showed no significant gender differences in learning capability ($p = 0.60$). Female ($M_f = 2.05$, $SD = 0.30$) and male ($M_m = 2.00$, $SD = 0.52$) teachers performed similarly across all domains. *Observing and being observed* ($M_f = 3.77$ vs. $M_m = 3.70$; $p = 0.82$), *planning classroom implementation* ($M_f = 3.82$ vs. $M_m = 3.62$; $p = 0.61$), *reviewing student work* ($M_f = 3.77$ vs. $M_m = 3.75$; $p = 0.95$), and *presenting, leading, and writing* ($M_f = 3.86$ vs. $M_m = 3.81$; $p = 0.40$) were all statistically equivalent. Overall, both male and female participants perceived and engaged with the training course in the same way.

Qualitative Results

Theme 1: Observing and Being Observed

Learning was mostly through virtual observation for online participants. Remy mentioned training “primarily through Zoom, YouTube” in IT applications and helping students to learn independently, along with knowledge of teaching methods, techniques, and assessment, but peer observation was scarce. For Brandon, the learning involved “video lectures... and learning with teachers through Zoom”, with an opportunity to understand how curricula were implemented, ICTs were incorporated, and other professional issues.

Situational learning was more prominent for offline participants. For Albee, group activities, micro-teaching, and presentations helped in observing “teaching procedure... designing tests... assessing learning outcomes” and to learn from “arisen situations... during [her] peers’ teaching demonstrations.” According to Julia, expert modeling through classroom resources and peer collaboration was “very helpful”.

Feedback on the observation also differed. Remy got online feedback on “class progress, class management skills,” while Brandon received comments on lesson plans rather than live teaching. Observation helped Albee “modify the way to conduct the procedures... [and] learn tips to manage the classroom,” and Julia, though initially “very nervous and frightened,” later felt “proud... when I was observed... and guided.” Overall, online observation emphasized knowledge acquisition, whereas offline training enabled interactive modelling and real-time pedagogical refinement.

Theme 2: Planning Classroom Implementation

All four teachers reported applying CLT, Task-based Language Teaching (TBLT), and especially Project-Based Teaching (PBT), though with varying degrees of adaptation. Remy considered these approaches “very good and can be applied in my school context,” but stressed that “teachers themselves need to adjust the materials to fit the students and the teaching and learning context.” Brandon similarly reported that he “adjusted the lesson plans” and could use “up to 90%” of the knowledge, though the reform “satisfies students’ learning needs, but challenges teachers” because “the duration is not enough to teach.”

Offline participants also emphasized flexibility. Albee integrated TBLT and PBT, noting that they “met students’ learning needs” while helping them “pass the exams,” and that she redesigned activities “depending on lesson aims and objectives.” Julia likewise implemented collaborative projects that “helped students develop their communicative competence and practical competence,” confirming that CLT could be applied flexibly “to meet my students’ needs.” Overall, these approaches were seen as workable when adapted to learners and classroom constraints.

Theme 3: Reviewing Students’ Work

Most teachers implemented peer- and self-assessment to monitor learning progress. Remy described how students evaluated one another “through the scoring criteria,” noting that group division “needs to be very subtle.” Brandon, although unable to practise this during training, later found that “peer-assessment activities were beneficial” in his context. Albee also used group evaluation and stressed the need to “evaluate students objectively... with clearly defined

criteria,” while Julia emphasized scaffolding weaker learners to keep them “active in learning.”

Across accounts, transparency, guidance, and structured criteria emerged as key conditions for effective peer and self-assessment. Reviewing students’ work thus functioned not only as evaluation but as a mechanism for promoting reflection and learner engagement.

Theme 4: Presenting, leading, and writing

Although their level of engagement varied, all four teachers were required to give presentations (individually or in groups) and then revise their work based on feedback. Remy explained that the course was “not really about presentation, mainly about teaching methods, Information Communication Technology, and pedagogical skills,” and therefore considered “writing the post-harvest” “not important.” In contrast, Brandon described completing a “group product,” delivering a class presentation, and submitting an individual post-harvest reflection. Similarly, Albee reported preparing “model teaching, presentations, and a final paper,” while Julia taught demonstration lessons and later “wrote a report about the training course.” Overall, presentations and post-training written reflections were compulsory course components, but participants differed in how important they felt these tasks were.

Cross-Data Interpretation of Teacher Learning

The integration of the quantitative and qualitative results offers a more comprehensive insight into the experiences of teachers in learning from the PD course. The quantitative results showed moderate and balanced levels of engagement with the four domains, indicating that the course provided equal levels of

engagement with the domains of *observing and being observed*, *planning for classroom implementation*, *reviewing student work*, and *presenting, leading, and writing*.

Qualitative data illuminate how this balance was enacted. Teachers described observation, micro-teaching, and feedback cycles corresponding to *observing and being observed*; contextual adaptation of methods reflecting *planning classroom implementation*; peer evaluation illustrating *reviewing student work*; and lesson presentations and reflective tasks supporting *presenting, leading, and writing*.

In combination, the two sets of findings demonstrate a convergence in understanding that the course facilitated learning through experiential, collaborative, and reflective processes. The survey findings, which indicate perceived engagement, are supplemented by the interview findings, which reveal the mechanisms that led to this engagement—observation cycles, contextualized planning, feedback, and the articulation of professional knowledge—that support the interpretation that the training course facilitated participatory rather than transmissive forms of professional learning.

Discussion

The results suggest that the participants regarded the PD course as a participatory and practice-oriented learning opportunity. The engagement of the teachers in the four dimensions of active professional learning proposed by Garet et al. (2001) indicates that the course created opportunities for active professional learning. It supports the view that professional learning should go beyond knowledge transmission and involve collaboration, experience, and reflection

(Asterhan & Lefstein, 2024; Darling-Hammond et al., 2017; Desimone & Garet, 2015).

The activities conducted during the course represented the four dimensions of active learning suggested by Garet et al. (2001). Micro-teaching and feedback corresponded to the dimension of observing and being observed; the adaptation of communicative approaches, TBLT, and PBL involved planning for classroom implementation; peer- and self-assessment referred to reviewing student work; the presentations, along with written reflections, were the elements of presenting, leading, and writing. Thus, the results suggest that the course promoted pedagogical awareness and adaptation (Desimone, 2009; Garet et al., 2001). However, this kind of perceived learning should not be viewed as an indication of instructional change, as the latter requires considerable time and consistent practice (Desimone & Garet, 2015; Novozhenina & López Pinzón, 2018).

Despite the reported adaptations, the application of TBLT or PBT, and changes in assessment practices, the current study did not include classroom observations, baseline data, or evidence of student achievement. Therefore, the results suggest potential pedagogical transfer but do not confirm it (Asterhan & Lefstein, 2024; Borg, 2018; Fernandes et al., 2023).

In Vietnam, the transfer of PD into practice is influenced by examination pressure, large class sizes, limited time, and differences in students' proficiency (Bui & H. T. M. Nguyen, 2016; Le, 2019; Ngo & Tran, 2024; X. N. C. M. Nguyen & V. H. Nguyen, 2019). Teachers' adaptation of materials and approaches can be regarded as emerging curricular agency (Priestley et al., 2015; Wang & Li, 2025), whereas the application of peer- and self-assessment can be seen as a step

towards the assessment for learning (Black & Wiliam, 2018). Nevertheless, it is quite difficult to implement these practices in an examination-focused system (Borg, 2018; X. N. C. M. Nguyen & V. H. Nguyen, 2019; Wang & Li, 2025).

In summary, this study has shown that short-term PD can provide opportunities to observe and be observed, plan for classroom implementation, review student work, and present, lead, and write when organized around active learning (Garet et al., 2001; Yumru, 2015). Nonetheless, the findings remain exploratory. In the future, longitudinal studies with classroom observations, analysis of student work, and assessment of learning outcomes need to be conducted to determine the relationship between teachers' perceived learning and instructional change and learning outcomes (Borg, 2018; Darling-Hammond et al., 2017; Fernandes et al., 2023).

Implications

The results have a number of implications for PD design in a reform-oriented setting such as Vietnam. Firstly, learning from practice through observation, micro-teaching, and feedback needs to be given more prominence than theoretical presentation. Secondly, the role of teachers in adapting the material has implications for developing curricular agency to make context-dependent pedagogical choices. Thirdly, peer and self-assessment suggest the importance of developing assessment literacy to encompass formative and learner-focused approaches to develop autonomy. Finally, professional learning communities, rather than one-off workshops, are essential for embedding reform-minded approaches through collaborative and reflective processes.

Conclusions and Recommendations

This study investigated how Vietnamese EFL teachers learned from a PD training course and what knowledge they gained through a MOET-funded PD program, with results indicating the presence of learner activities in all four aspects of Garet et al.'s framework of active learning. Thus, the course appeared to provide opportunities for active, context-sensitive, and collaborative learning.

Nevertheless, the use of only self-reporting data collection method, lack of baseline and outcomes measurements, and having a small sample size make it inappropriate to draw any conclusion regarding long-term instructional changes. Further investigations should consider using longitudinal design with multiple data collection methods to check whether learning is converted into instructional impact.

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Bionote

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