Online collaboration of English language teachers for meaningful professional development experiences

Muhammad Kamarul Kabilan
UNIVERSITI SAINS MALAYSIA

Wan Fara Wan Adlina
UNIVERSITI TEKNOLOGI MALAYSIA

Mohamed Amin Embi
UNIVERSITI KEBANGSAAN MALAYSIA

> *ABSTRACT: This article reports on an online collaborative project between English language teachers pursuing a degree in TESL/TESOL from three universities in Malaysia – Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM), Universiti Teknologi Malaysia (UTM) and Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM). A total of 142 teachers were involved in the study and about three to eight teachers from each university were grouped and assigned a virtual classroom in Nicenet's Internet Classroom Assistant (*www.nicenet.org*) where online discussions took place. Each group's main task was to produce an online newsletter that highlights three major topics – project work in TESOL, linguistics in language teaching and learner strategies. A qualitative study was then carried out to identify the teachers' meaningful experiences in the project and how it had enriched their professional development. The data obtained from the teachers' reflective reports indicates four main facets of meaningful professional development experiences – envisioning of professional development, gaining and enhancing skills, sharing and exchanging, and socialising.*
>
> *Keywords: Online collaboration, teacher development and growth.*

INTRODUCTION

Professional development is one aspect of lifelong learning and teachers have to understand the need to continually learn, whether this is done formally or informally. Nicholls (2000) defines professional development as "the enhancement of knowledge, skills and understanding of individuals or groups in learning contexts that maybe identified by themselves or their institutions" (p. 371). Professional development of teachers would include a broad range of activities that are designed to contribute to the learning of teachers, who have completed their initial training (Craft, 1996), and who have to make a continuous and determined effort in order to become and remain a knowledgeable, skilful and efficient teacher. Such teachers, who undergo meaningful professional development experiences, are "better prepared to make the most effective curriculum and instructional decisions" (Vrasidas & Zembylas, 2004, p. 326). However, professional development does not simply mean the learning of new information, facts, teaching methods or knowledge. Professional development should be engage teachers in learning cycles for teachers that are both dynamic and flexible. These engaging learning experiences should facilitate teachers to gain new understandings of current situations and contexts, and enhance their awareness of

their own professional strengths and weaknesses that will lead them to examine their own practices and philosophies as teachers.

There are many indications from research and literature that the conventional mode of professional development has failed in delivering meaningful experiences that are required to enhance teachers' professional learning and their competencies. Schlager and Fusco (2003), based on their review of research, conclude that conventional professional development organised at the school, local and national levels are "disconnected from practice, fragmented and misaligned. Many of the programmes lack key pedagogical, content, and structural characteristics of effective professional development that are needed by the teachers they serve" (p. 205). In Malaysia, English language teachers report similar dissatisfaction over the kind of professional development programmes and learning that are provided to them (Kabilan, 2006, 2003a) – professional development that does not contribute to new competencies. Teachers in the study conducted by Kabilan, Vethamani and Fong (2008) lamented that most of the time, the courses conducted did not touch on classroom teaching and learning, and that they were mere repetitions of what they had studied at teacher education colleges during their initial training.

With the extensive use of Internet and computer-mediated communication (CMC) technologies for educational purposes, a dynamic process of learning and meaningful engagement of teachers can be cultivated via the online environment. The online platform can be utilised by teachers to gain and develop new competencies that are critically important to their enhancement of their knowledge and teaching repertoire. Online professional development activities and programmes have the capacity to encourage collaboration between pre-service and in-service teachers that focus on their interaction and engagement for meaningful learning experiences (Kaufman & Brooks, 1996). This is possible due to the features of CMC and related Internet applications, which allow and stimulate an extensive (ubiquitous and far-reaching, for example, Malaysian teachers connecting with overseas teachers) and varied (for example, sharing and exchanging ideas, views and opinions; collaborating with others) form of professional development and learning.

Of late, studies in the use of CMC and related Internet applications for language teacher collaboration have begun to explore the impact of online interaction and socialisation of in-service and pre-service teachers on their learning and development (Coughlin & Kajder, 2009; Arnold & Ducate, 2006; Pawan, Paulus, Yalcin & Ching-Fen, 2003). Coughlin and Kajder (2009) strongly emphasise the contribution of online collaboration, which includes "Access to authentic, often global audiences; multimodal means of communicating meaning and knowledge; feedback that is expert and often immediate; and opportunities for identity development and self-presentation" (p. 7).

In line with these current practices, this study aimed to enhance Malaysian, pre-service English language teachers' professional development via CMC and related Internet applications. It sought answers to the question of English language teachers might collaborate in an authentic online learning context and how such an endeavour might lead to meaningful professional development experiences. We were very much interested to discern various online communities of practice (but with similar goals and aims, in similar contexts) in action. Our aim was to examine the teachers'

engagement in authentic and useful collaborative tasks and identify the effects on teachers' professional development experiences. Hence, an online collaboration engagement was planned, developed and organised between educational faculties of three premier universities in Malaysia – Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM), Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM) and Universiti Teknologi Malaysia (UTM). This article describes the online collaboration undertaken and reports on the teachers' meaningful experiences in the project and how it has enriched their professional development.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Online professional development

Professional development using CMC technologies and related Internet applications is referred to online professional development (OPD). OPD refers to any activities, programmes, opportunities or experiences undertaken via CMC and related Internet applications by teachers that lead to the enhancement of knowledge, skills, motivation and understanding of individuals or groups in learning contexts that may be identified by themselves or their institutions. Examples of OPD activities or experiences include networking and collaborating with fellow teachers, subscribing to discussion lists, attending online conferences and seminars, reading professional online journals and books, writing articles to be published in the Internet (online journals), conducting action research via/with the aid of the Internet, and posting messages on bulletin boards.

In a literature analysis of participation in OPD, Kabilan (2005a) identified five categories of competencies that are gained by teachers: (1) teacher motivation, (2) skills, knowledge and ideas, (3) self-directed learning, (4) interactive competence and, (5) computer technology awareness and skills. He concluded from the analysis, which examined various online activities including online interactions and collaborations, that research in the field of online professional development has "consistently indicated the advantages of OPD for teachers, assisting them in gaining valuable competencies to a certain extent" (p. 55). Nevertheless, there are instances where OPD activities do not seem to be advantageous or be of interest to some teachers, because they are simply not interested in it (Kabilan, 2003a; Moonen & Voogt, 2000). This reluctance factor, at times, is related to the fact that teachers have little or no knowledge and experience of technology or telecommunications in general (Levin & Thurston, 1996). Two other key problems of OPD are the intellectual argument being completed by a few individuals (rather than the involvement by all), and the lack of opening up of real debate and discussion (Owen, 2000).

Nonetheless, interaction and collaboration via CMC and online networks are strongly emerging as profound learning experiences for educators (Allan & Lawless, 2003) and they do contribute quite significantly to professional engagement and the education of teachers, particularly in the enhancement of their competencies (see Bowman, Boyle, Greenstone, Herndon & Valente, 2000; Kabilan & Mohamed Amin, 2006). These sustained dialogue-driven collaborations using Internet tools support and contribute to the scaffolding of teachers' knowledge (Hawkes, 2000). The literature strongly suggests that teachers who collaborate online help each other to clarify their thoughts on many aspects of teaching, and this encourages them to grow as a teacher (see Crosta, 2002; McConnell, 2000; Tsui, Wu & Sengupta, 1996). Teachers involved

in online collaborations gain "a rich treasury of teaching ideas through the responses of group members to (their) own and others' questions" and assist them to solve problems in their teaching (Bowman et al., 2000, p. 18). These practices challenge the traditional notions of teachers working in isolation, and bring together teams of people, each with unique contributions. According to Ellis and Renata (2000), it paves the way for new teaching and learning modes, which are seldom practiced, such as (1) ongoing and regular maintenance and updating of issues/matters related to teaching and learning materials and resources; (2) fulfilling students' expectations of teaching staff to provide input and feedback and; (3) developing the "collaborative relationships" (p. 28) to build meaningful and useful interactions.

Online collaboration of teachers

Ellis and Renata (2000) define collaboration as "a major tenet of action learning, with small teams or 'sets' working together on tasks or problems" (p. 28). This aspect of action learning entails "a simple but effective cyclical structure, which involves participants in planning, acting, observing and reflecting" (Ellis & Renata, 2000, p. 28). Online collaboration can be done in many ways, and may have many objectives and aims, depending on the types of institutions and their missions in education. In this respect, many online networks, since the mid-1990s, have been created to augment collaborative efforts and enrich English language teachers' professional development. For example, Teachers of English Language Education Nexus (TeleNex) – an evolving teaching resource database established in University of Hong Kong – is part of a computer-based teacher support network targeted at building an ongoing partnership between teachers and teacher educators, and to help create a collaborative culture across schools in Hong Kong (Sengupta & Nicholson, 1996). In Japan, similar networks are also used to support instructors in teaching English (Schmitt & Christianson, 1998), especially in respect of language instruction tools, communication with students, pedagogical and research applications, monitoring language use and evaluation and grading. Likewise, in Egypt, the findings of one study illustrate that teachers are prepared to utilise technology in the teaching of English, due to their belief that "technology is both affectively and pedagogically useful to high-quality instruction" (England, 2007).

Online collaboration, quite frequently, is also a direct result of the establishment of online communities of professional teachers and OPD centres. These communities and centres are abundant on the Internet, and serve a wide range of teachers' interests and needs. Studies on OPD also concentrate on these communities and centres, and emphasize the main outcomes, that is, teachers' development and teachers' collaboration in online environments (see Kabilan, 2003b; Bringleson & Carey, 2000; Sujo de Montes, 1999; Talley, 1998). In relation to these online communities, the concept of learning networks (LN) is integral and LN can propagate rich experiences in collaborative learning, which Harasim, Hiltz, Teles & Turnoff (1997) term as a "interactive group knowledge-building process" (p. 4). Choi (2006) considers the use of a virtual atmosphere to stimulate a community of practice as an "alternative environment for the creation of knowledge" (p. 145), where sharing ideas and experiences transpire, and meanings are derived from interactions between the members of the community. Harasim, et al. (1997) explain that teachers who engage in OPD activities construct knowledge by "formulating ideas into words that are shared with and built upon through the reaction and responses of others" (p. 4).

Naturally, LNs, as Harasim et al. (1997) see it, are "groups of people who use Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC) networks to learn together, at the time, place and pace that best suits them and is appropriate to the task" (p. 4). In setting up a LN for teachers in this study, Harasim et al.'s (1997) main considerations were adapted and integrated into the project (see next section for detailed explanation).

METHODS

Participants

The online collaboration project lasted for one academic semester (about 14 weeks). A total of 142 teachers (USM=31, UKM=77 and UTM =34) participated in this study. They were in-service teachers who were pursuing their bachelor degrees as full-time students and fresh pre-service teachers who were pursuing bachelor degrees in TESOL or TESL. They were selected as participants in this study because they registered for the respective courses that the researchers were teaching in the three universities (convenience sampling). These 142 teachers introduced a myriad of teaching capabilities and experiences into the collaboration, and this naturally enriched each IG with discussions that were based on their experiences.

Instrument and data analysis

Upon completion and submission of all the related tasks, the teachers were asked to prepare a reflective report, in which they were required to depict and explain how and to what extent the online collaboration had contributed to their professional development, if applicable. The data, in the shape of the teachers' thoughts, views, perceptions and experiences of CLVE (Collaborative Learning in a Virtual Environment), were categorised into constructs or categories. This strategy enabled us to detect the reoccurring themes, and physically separate different contributions of the online collaboration to the teachers' development. By grouping these contributions, we became well aware of the teachers' views and how they defined the settings or particular topics in CLVE (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992). Data were coded to facilitate easier management of data and the citing of source. For example, "UKM 6" refers to teacher number 6 from UKM.

Data were analysed using coding strategies, which were the means of sorting the data collected from the reflective report so that the material bearing on a given topic or theme could be physically separated from other data. For the purpose of this study, the coding was based on "situation codes" and "activity codes". The aim of situation codes was to place units of data that described how the students reflected, defined, perceived and connected the act of their engagement in the collaborative tasks and identify the effects on their professional development experiences. The situation codes were framed to identify and understand the situations of the online collaboration that contributed to their professional development, that were important and meaningful for the teachers. For activity codes, they were directed at identifying and understanding the teachers' regularly occurring kinds of behaviour, specifically professional development practices, experiences and change, as consequences of the online collaboration and tasks in the CLVE project (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992). Schema, such as Table 2, was used to code, arrange, organise and analyse the data.

Nevertheless, readers should note that the rich nature of the data from the reflective report means that some excerpts may indicate or contain more than one theme and, at times, the themes may be intertwined with one another in an excerpt.

Example excerpts (student)	Analyses (note/comment)	Themes
At the beginning I was confused with the instructions. As a result I was unable to initiate communication through online. Even though the practice of computer technology is not a new thing to me, I found it difficult to work online due to the earlier puzzlements with the task. To overcome this problem, I discussed with my group members who helped me with the collaboration work. Later, I sent a mail to introduce myself through the Nicenet. Some of my new acquaintances responded to my mail. This was the first step how did I my imitation on this online collaboration project (USM 9) [Activity Code]	Teachers overcome problems by collaborating with peers from IG. The tasks were designed so that the teachers can realistically work together within the IG and cooperate with other teachers from other institutions.	**Gaining and enhancing skills:** *Problem-solving skills*
The online collaboration project has certainly benefited me in terms of giving me fresh new ideas on how online collaboration works and I would certainly like to give it a try on my future students (UKM 5) [Situation Code]	The teachers talk about using the current knowledge gained and constructed for future professional endeavours, including for teaching and learning purposes.	**Envisioning professional development**: *Future practices*
…online collaboration will set a path to intertwine ideas in order to keep quality of work produced by university students so as to set a benchmark to reveal the work of university level students. Therefore, as an English language teacher trainee, I have benefited most tremendously in being able to work online with people of the same "genre" to gather information in producing a better work (USM 20). [Situation Code]	(the)…sharing of experiences, which entails not only sharing of experiences but also learning from those experiences, and then reconstructing existing knowledge and ideas and subsequently improving their quality in the shape of new ideas that are discernable in the online newsletters produced.	**Sharing and Exchanging:** *Improving quality of work*
This project knitted the cooperation among us especially when we worked on the newsletter. We kept in touch with each other in order to accomplish the task. All the decisions were made by the group members. We kept asking for the group's opinion before we made the decision (USM 3). [Activity Code].	Through this network, though the teachers work autonomously and independently, they also work together with others and make collective decisions in order to complete the tasks given.	**Socialising:** *Working individually and working together*

Table 1. Sample analysis of qualitative data using coding strategies

Research settings

The online collaboration – CLVE

The online collaboration project between these three universities was named CLVE – Collaborative Learning in a Virtual Environment. A series of face-to-face and online discussions between researchers from these three universities were held in planning, outlining, structuring and developing CLVE, enveloping the following aspects. One of the main issues discussed was identifying the important elements that needed to be considered to establish a meaningful learning network, as suggested by Harasim et al. (1997). Due to the diverse characteristics and features of the courses enrolled in by the students, we decided that the elements or considerations should be applicable to all three institutions involved, and this would allow the students to be able to easily understand and identify their involvement in this collaboration. As a result, seven main considerations were identified and adapted from Harasim et al. (1997) (see Table 2), and used as a basis for the designing, planning and implementing the online collaboration project.

1.	Identifying the needs of teachers in terms of educational activities that can benefit from OPD activities.
2.	Ensuring convenient and regular access to the requisite computer resources and systems (including the Internet), ongoing technical assistance and support to address technical problems and assisting new users of the network.
3.	Obtaining administrative recognition and support in implementing and maintaining learning network of teachers for the teachers.
4.	Designing the curriculum with the educational goals in terms of the content area, knowledge and skills that are to be gained; the related topics, readings and activities; and the assignments that can be used to build and demonstrate the teachers' mastery of the knowledge in mind.
5.	Developing appropriate curricular and educational materials.
6.	Designing the online environment, which should be based on the application of the LN, whether the environment is based on seminars, debate or role-playing.
7.	Preparing and organising resources – subject expert, course materials, text books/ paper based materials in advance

Table 2. Considerations for establishing a learning network
(Adapted from Harasim, et al., 1997)

Aims and objectives of CLVE

Identifying and determining the "right" and effective objectives of CLVE are important, as they determine, shape and mould many of the subsequent facets of CLVE that will be described here and therefore help ensure a successful collaboration between teachers from these three universities. Considerations 1 and 4 (Table 2) were taken into account while establishing the objectives of CLVE, which were to:

1. provide a platform for English teachers to produce new knowledge or reconstruct existing knowledge;
2. allow teachers to work online on the assigned academic tasks;
3. give teachers the opportunity for social interaction – in an online environment; and

4. facilitate new learning experiences for teachers in an authentic collaborative environment (working with peers from other institutions).

Online platform
For the collaboration and discussions between teachers from the three universities to flourish, an online learning network (OLN), that is, Nicenet's Internet Classroom Assistant (www.nicenet.org) was chosen and decided upon based on considerations 2, 3 and 6 as suggested by Harasim et al. (1997). Nicenet is an established and open OLN that allows all the basic learning elements and functions that are required for a learning project of this scale. Also, since all three universities' Internet and networking access are "firewalled", there was a genuine concern among the researchers that using other OLNs might seriously hinder the progress of CLVE, especially in accessing the site. Thus, Nicenet was selected as a "safe" choice for the project to be successfully completed within the stipulated time frame.

Procedures and processes
The procedures and processes were basically founded on considerations 3 and 7. First was "class preparation", whereby, as moderators for each university, the researchers registered and subscribed to Nicenet and created the necessary environment and learning elements for CLVE, which were in the form of "online classrooms" where learning activities, discussions and collaborations would take place. Then, the forming of online collaboration groups or communities was undertaken. Teachers from each university were grouped into nine (9) groups (each was called Class Group or CG), whereby each CG was led by a group leader (GL). Each class group (CG) merged with the other two CGs from the other universities and formed an intervarsity group (IG) (Figure 1).

Each IG was led by a coordinator (C), who was chosen from the GLs. Once this procedure was completed, the teachers were asked to register with Nicenet and also register with their respective online classrooms. In order to ensure that there was no unwanted intrusion into the classrooms, each member of an IG was given a class key, without which entry into the classroom and access to the discussions and materials would be denied. When everything was in place, the moderators asked the CGs to go online to have the first "meeting" with their respective IG members in a self-introduction session, and begin their online collaboration and discussions. After the introductory session, the students discussed more seriously on academic matters, especially those pertinent to the tasks and the projects that needed to be carried out.

Tasks
Elements of considerations 1, 5 and 7 (Table2) were fused in the tasks that were developed. The procedures for designing and structuring tasks needed careful attention, as we had to ensure that the tasks would sustain the teachers' interest in the online collaboration, provide a strong challenge to them and at the same time, the teachers would be able to surmount whatever obstacles or difficulties that they would face in the process of completing the tasks. Hence, the tasks planned were also intended to be within their limitations and capabilities, as we realized that many might not have the required information and communication technology (ICT) skills or high levels of computing skills to contribute meaningfully to their respective IG.
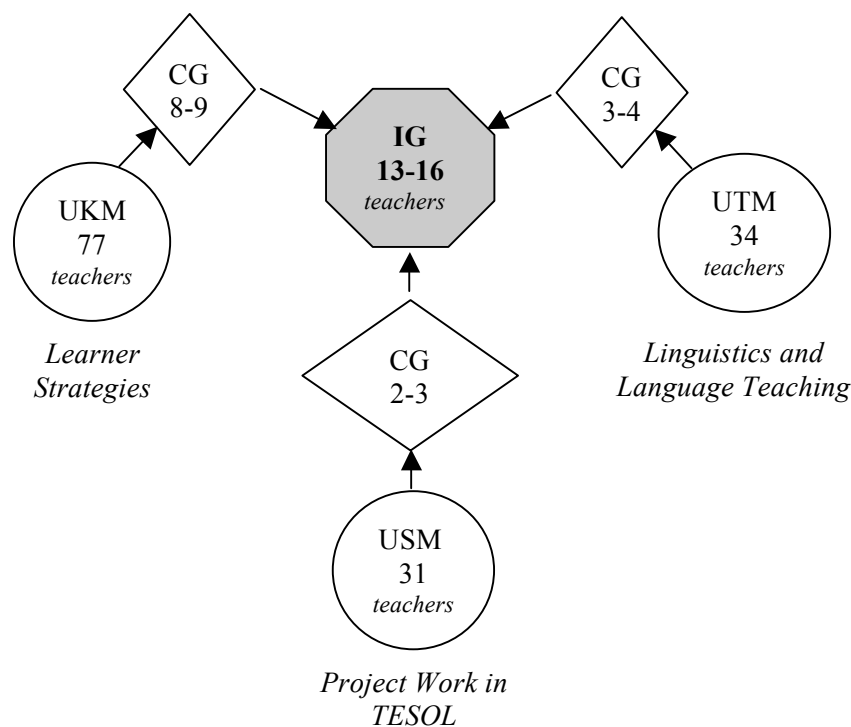
Figure 1. Forming of an online collaboration group from three universities

Another important factor that intervened and influenced the design of tasks was the academic courses that the teachers were enrolled in their own universities. Teachers from USM were enrolled for the course, "Project Work in TESOL", teachers from UKM were doing "Learners Strategies" and the UTM teachers were enrolled in "Linguistics in Language Teaching". Apart from that, we also had to consider the fact that these teachers were from different cohorts – USM teachers being second-year students, UKM teachers were a mixed lot while the UTM teachers were first-year students. In addition, these teachers brought in different types of experiences; different levels of knowledge and understanding of teaching and learning; and different levels of ICT skills. To make matters even more complex, the courses mentioned had their own assessment and coursework components.

Taking into account all of the above concerns and factors, we developed one main task and four sub-tasks and integrated some form of assessment into CLVE to enhance the teachers' motivation to participate in the project (Vethamani, 2004). So, a right balance between the type and depth of tasks, objectives of CLVE, resources and capabilities, academic components and requirements had to be achieved for the development of quality, challenging and rewarding tasks in terms of learning, and for fostering rich professional development engagement between the teachers in an online collaboration.

The main task of each IG was to work collaboratively online (in Nicenet) and produce an online newsletter. This would be the biggest challenge for all the teachers – to go online with strangers and work together as a collaborative unit and as a community of practice to achieve common aims and goals, while completing the three main tasks that were incorporated into the online newsletter. And for many of the teachers, this

was their first experience of being involved in an online engagement of any sort, and for a few this would be their first time ever exploring the Internet.

Sub-task 1: Each IG must create and identify the concept, name and organisation of their online newsletter and decide on the roles and responsibilities of each member. The content of the newsletter must reflect the name, identity and concept chosen. The teachers were given a free hand on the content and design of the online newsletter and where to publish the online newsletters. We did not want to interfere too much, for the fear of inhibiting their creativity in producing the online newsletter. But the moderators were always there to guide and help when required.

Sub-task 2: Each IG must write 3 articles, where each article is based on the following topics: i) Project work in TESOL (USM); ii) Learner strategies (UKM); and iii) Linguistics in language teaching (UTM). While embarking on this project, we also recognised that we did not want the teachers to be burdened by CLVE and hinder or disrupt their own academic responsibilities in their respective courses. Therefore, we agreed that whatever materials that were developed or created in their course, could be adopted and used for the online newsletter, and vice versa.

Sub-task 3: Besides the above two tasks, the IGs were able to add in other components/contents as well, and the decision to do so was given to the members of the IGs. Nevertheless, any additional content had to be related to the topics, while others might be of general interest and related to education or teaching and learning English. Some examples were:

- book reviews (particularly on ELT or education);
- interesting language games / activities;
- biodata and pictures (of each member) – in the editorial board;
- a review on a tourist spot or a favourite vacation place;
- proverbs or idioms;
- Teaching English as a Second Language (TESL) /Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages TESOL) profession: interviews, observations, career, etc.

The online newsletters were assessed and grades were given to each teacher, and those grades were taken into consideration for their academic courses at their respective universities. Some of the criteria used to evaluate the newsletter were creativity, originality, the extent of collaborative effort among the teachers from the three universities, and the academic quality of the featured writing.

Sub-task 4: This task was a comparative project paper (CPP), where the teachers worked individually and produced an academic paper that discussed and compared their experiences in learning and studying, particularly in the courses that they were enrolled in for that semester. The CPP hinged mainly on the discussion with other members from other universities. For example, a teacher from USM could ask (in the online classroom) for opinions, views or ideas for a project that could be implemented in a rural school, and the ideas

and responses given by UKM and UTM teachers could be the basis for deeper discussion in CPP. In order to further enrich the online discussion and collaboration, the teachers were required to cite comments or thoughts given by their peers in CPP and use them as further points of debate. This was to elicit fresh thoughts on the topics from peers and to encourage academic conversations between the teachers. Again, as with the online newsletter, the CPP was graded by the respective moderators.

Research limitation

The main limitation of research of this nature is that the researchers were not able to identify and monitor closely, let alone control the participants' interactions, activities and discussions that might take place in their respective IGs. Hence, the reflective report would serve as an "observational" tool for the researchers to identify the participants' activities and interactions. It would also help the researchers to make sense of the benefits of CLVE in terms of the teachers' professional development rather than actually examining their behaviours in CLVE, which would be ideal and more accurate but extremely difficult in making the right analysis and conclusion. The reflective report allowed the researchers to analyse the participants' views, opinions and their conclusions in determining and understanding the teachers' professional development experiences.

FINDINGS

The data obtained from the teachers' reflective reports of the CLVE project indicated that there were four main themes or categories of aspects of professional development of English language teachers that were enriched. The four main categories were envisioning of professional development, gaining and enhancing skills, sharing and exchanging, and socialising.

Envisioning professional development

A number of the respondents conversed and related notions of how CLVE had significantly affected them in terms of charting their future professional development engagements. They also stressed that they were envisioning their future professional development endeavours based on the project,

> ...online collaboration project is a good e-learning tool where it calls for elimination of a standardized curriculum. Instead, it promotes using curricular customised to our prior knowledge. The task "what it means to be an English language teacher" helped me to express my hopes and expectations when I go back to school next year and I would be able to share it with my friends. (USM 9)

> ...I plan to carry out this online collaboration later in my teaching. (UKM 16)

> This style of communication can be carried on when I am posted to schools whereby, I can get my online friends to share a variety of ideas to teach English in the best possible ways. (UTM 2)

The group comprises of senior, young and aspiring teachers and therefore, I received diverse and a variety of views, opinions and suggestions. Thus, this helps me see things from different perspectives and enables me to come up with the best activities that encapsulate all these ideas. Therefore, I think online collaboration is vital to us teachers and it is the path to future teaching as being online enables us teachers from all over the country to communicate and share our ideas, the latest teaching strategies and development. Hence, we will always be in touch with the latest news no matter where we are. (USM 22).

Exposure to CLVE resulted in some teachers thinking of similar projects for their future students,

I would like to persist this knowledge in future for my own benefits and I might depart the knowledge to my students in school. (USM 14)

The online collaboration project has certainly benefited me in terms of giving me fresh new ideas on how online collaboration works and I would certainly like to give it a try on my future students. (UKM 5)

...(CLVE) gives us as a teacher more information about using the Internet technology in teaching the language to our future students. (USM 24)

Gaining and enhancing skills

The teachers reported five types of skills that they have learned or developed as a result of participating in CLVE. First, their reflections highlighted how they had learned the skills of planning and researching while participating in CLVE. These skills were attained when the teachers made "sure that certain details are looked into properly and there should be some background survey of the participants and their ability so that when a task is planned and implemented, the participants have the necessary skills relevant to the task when carrying out the project" (USM 8). Also, "good planning really helps in order to make the project successful and you feel satisfied with all the effort that you put for this big project" (UTM 9). USM 23 agreed that good planning does lead to a successful project as he "learned (how) to plan and organise my work well so that whatever tasks given can be done smoothly without having so much trouble. I find that planning stages is very important as it really helps me to organise and do my work better."

The second skill identified by some of the teachers was problem-solving. By participating in CLVE, they were constantly solving problems as the tasks demanded rigorous and thoughtful work, as well as also active involvement and contribution. USM 9 explained:

At the beginning I was confused with the instructions. As a result I was unable to initiate communication through online. Even though the practice of computer technology is not a new thing to me, I found it difficult to work online due to the earlier puzzlements with the task. To overcome this problem, I discussed with my group members who helped me with the collaboration work. Later I sent a mail to introduce myself through the Nicenet. Some of my new acquaintances responded to my mail. This was the first step how did I my imitation on this online collaboration project" (USM 9)

UKM 18 also agreed that solving problems cannot be done in isolation, but requires help from other members of the practising community because "collaborations arise from the need to solve problems through discussion and exchange of ideas" and as such it "broadens our scope of thinking..." (UTM 13).

The next skill was the fundamental notion of learning, while emphasising the idea of lifelong learning. UKM 47 stresseed that CLVE was "A new experience that will contribute to lifelong learning, thus creating a new era of learning process." In addition, the participants acknowledged that they were constantly learning new things as they explored and experienced CLVE. For instance, USM 20 said that the project provided him with "a good platform to learn new things" and similarly, UTM 11 was "looking forward to learning something new". UTM 12 explained this "new" platform of learning:

> Each student is responsible for the other's learning as well as their own. The success of one student will also help the success of the others. With advancements in technology, this classic project has become more exciting, and open more doors to learning for me. (UTM 12)

In such a learning platform, some of the teachers gained new understanding and insights into the process of teaching and learning:

> The idea of creating an online bulletin is just amazing. As this is a whole new experience for me, I find myself exploring into different materials and trying to be more creative in my work. Since I'm in charge of Idioms, Quizzes and Songs, I realise how I can make teaching language fun in my classroom. I come across a lot of useful tips and strategies to incorporate fun activities like using songs and puzzles in teaching language. I just can't wait to see how our bulletin will finally turn out. (UKM 23)

All of the above culminated and led to the teachers' ability to create knowledge:

> ...(CLVE) allows teacher trainees to give ideas, share thoughts, be exposed to new information, and as a result, they will construct a new form of creation and findings to improve and develop through the right combination of knowledge and experience in order to become a "world class" educator. (USM 27)

The fourth was gaining language skills. The teachers mentioned this aspect because CLVE "allows active English language usage among the undergraduates" (USM 11) and "promotes the usage of language either in communicating or expanding ideas in different perspective" (USM 24). More specifically, the teachers noted that CLVE contributed to writing and communication skills, as emphasised by the following teachers:

> The online collaboration is testing your writing skills and your human relation skills. We have to learn how to make new friends, stating your views, accepting different opinions, giving tasks or command to friends who you have never met before and all these have to be done through writing. (USM 11)

> Throughout my time participating in the online discussion with members from other universities, I learned that I must be more tactful and that this task requires extra effort as we can only meet virtually and not in the flesh. Besides that, this task is

> asynchronous and we can only receive feedback from other members whenever they are free to access to the Internet. (USM 6).

> Improving my grammar and writing skills. (UKM 5)

> It really helped my writing skills from monitoring others' writings. Sometimes, it boosts my confidence in speaking. (UKM 75).

The teachers also gained useful computing skills while participating in CLVE. It helped them in becoming more confident with the computers and Internet, changing existing negative perceptions of computers, and learning new things and skills related to computers. The teachers elucidated:

> As I am not computer savvy the online collaboration has taken me to an extra mile where I learned how to collaborate in the online discussion. It is because I have not even experienced chatting in the net as some of my friends do. (USM 13)

> At the beginning stage, I was not clear of what and how to go about it as I know that this task does a lot with computer and online system. With not much of computer knowledge, I started to log in into Nicenet for the very first time. I was immersed with the technology where we could have conference with other members from different universities even at the same time...I had changed my perception towards computer system which once I felt alienated to but now I can work on it without hesitation. (USM 14)

> We exchanged ideas among us and we did the discussion through online. Frankly, I do not surf the net, but after this project have been introduced to us, I became more keen and interested in using the net...it did help me a lot in becoming computer literate. (USM 26).

Sharing and exchanging

In terms of the enhancement and engagement in professional development activities of the English language teachers, the act of sharing and exchanging were overarching practices that led and guided the teachers in many respects. One was exchanging and sharing information by which the teachers "get to know a lot of new things regarding the topic given" (USM 15) and also "interact with TESL students from other university". By doing so, USM 2 was able to "share so much useful information with them...though this is my first time to collaborate with students from other university" (USM 2).

Apart from information, CLVE encouraged the sharing of experiences of the teachers. As there were different cohorts of teachers, the sharing became more meaningful, as they learned from each other, and worked "together to create something useful and beneficial to others" (UKM 52).

> I also can share some good experiences of my teaching experience with my friend and some of them are also doing the same course like me. (USM 2)

> …provided an opportunity for me to share my experiences with the rest of the friends in the group. Some of the members were too young and just finished their school life.

So, they really appreciated our contribution and the experience that we shared with them. (USM 13)

CLVE quite successfully promulgated the concept of sharing and exchanging ideas and thoughts amongst the teachers, which was prevalent throughout the project and in many forms. It benefited the teachers in sharing and exchanging ideas "with my course mates and friends from USM and UTM" (UKM 77). These kinds of discussions and collaboration led the teachers to "witness different views, opinions and suggestions" where there were times a teacher's stance on certain topics might differ from others but they learned to consider others' points of view and come to a conclusion whether they would accept it (USM 11). The teachers shared and exchanged "thoughts and ideas of certain topic with others especially our Nicenet group members" (UTM 3), and as such it helped the teachers to "come out with interesting activities especially activities for my language camp" (USM 5). USM 20 further explained this:

> If not for this online collaboration that enables me to share ideas with students from collaborating universities, the information that I would have produced would have been solely based on the ideas gathered from my friends and I from USM. This would have not resulted in a fabulous design of the newsletter all of us produced together...quality work should be based on ideas taken from many sources and not bound to a single source. Therefore, online collaboration will set a path to intertwine ideas in order to keep quality of work produced by university students so as to set a benchmark to reveal the work of university level students. Therefore, as an English language teacher trainee, I have benefited most tremendously in being able to work online with people of the same 'genre' to gather information in producing a better work. (USM 20)

They also shared much information and knowledge regarding the tasks that had been assigned to them, especially "in the different classroom activities for the teaching of literature, grammar and how to learn English using or integrating ICT" (UTM 12), or enhancing knowledge on learner strategies (UKM 38).

Teachers also shared views and ideas on "a new approach or methodology that can be used in the classroom" (USM 3& USM 15) through CLVE, indicating that apart from discussing and accomplishing the tasks given, the online collaboration also facilitated genuine discussions that would enhance their professional development. This was because "the online collaboration gave me some insights about carrying out teaching and learning English language" (USM 9), where the traditional classroom methods were put aside (UTM 25). This was most probably, reported one teacher, because it also "gives us more ideas about teaching method by discussing it openly in the net" (USM 24).

Socialising

While socialising in CLVE, most of the teachers displayed a thorough commitment and a high level of interaction in order to solve problems arising and complete the tasks given. They were proactive and usually initiated the discussion and were aware of the responsibility or each member of the IG.

> ...participation and commitment by group members must be 100% otherwise information cannot be shared and tasks cannot be delegated. (USM 8)

> ...one must be more pro-active and start off first so that other members may follow suit. Otherwise, one will be waiting for the others and in the end nothing will come out of it. Although I do not consider myself as the head of Group 8 but I feel that I have initiated a lo of discussion in order to get the newsletter produced. (USM 6)

> ...one must be pro-active and start first so that the other members may follow suit. Otherwise, one will be waiting for the other and in the end nothing will come out of it. (USM 19)

> I found that my team from UKM is very active and dedicated. (UTM 12)

Teachers informed us of their great experience of "working with so many people at the same time" (UKM 1) and in terms of cooperation and making decisions, working collectively was ever so important in getting things done:

> This project knitted the cooperation among us especially when we worked on the newsletter. We kept in touch with each other in order to accomplish the task. All the decisions were made by the group members. We kept asking for the group's opinion before we made the decision. (USM 3)

CLVE was also about friendship and building networks (UKM 42), and through this circle of new peers, the teachers found themselves becoming more confident (UKM 44). The tasks assigned also contributed to raising teachers' confidence levels.

> There is one important thing that I have learnt through this assignment: how to be more confident! (UKM 35)

> Sometimes, it boosts my confidence in speaking. (UKM 75)

DISCUSSION

The English language teachers involved in CLVE believed that four main facets of their professional development engagements were enriched. The first was the envisioning of their professional development. They talked about using the current knowledge gained and constructed for future professional endeavours, including for teaching and learning purposes. Kabilan and Mohamed Amin (2006) explain that this trend is "the reconstruction, reconfiguration and reuse of knowledge produced from teachers' existing practices in professional engagements" (p. 100) as a direct or indirect result of online professional development. Such inclinations may well influence and contribute to the teachers' future undertakings and practices, where the "knowledge and theory of the professional education and development of teachers in the given context" (Kabilan & Mohamed Amin, 2006, p. 100) will play critical roles and should not be overlooked.

The second facet was the gaining and enhancing of the five main skills. These skills were consolidated as a result of three main factors that were "fused together". The first factor was the tasks, which were relevant, authentic, difficult, challenging and yet

attainable. The tasks required the teachers to realistically work together within the IG and cooperate with other teachers from other institutions. In addition, a well-designed structure of CLVE that gives the opportunity to every teacher to be actively and productively involved in the online collaboration, eventually leading to total commitment, was also crucial to the success of the online collaboration. The fundamental idea was that each member of an IG had to contribute to the cause of the online collaboration. The third factor was the nature of the collaboration, which was authentic and as such, truly needed the teachers to utilise/to learn/and be exposed to various skills as identified. And because different individuals contributed different skills and abilities, each IG benefited in various ways, especially from teachers who brought in considerable computing knowledge and skills, creativity and motivation.

The third facet of professional development that the teachers benefited from was the opportunity to share and exchange information, knowledge, ideas, views and opinions related to various issues concerning the tasks given and also ELT matters in general. This is a widespread phenomenon, as many previous studies have indicated comparable practices (see Berhanuddin & Wan Fara Adlina, 2006; Tan, 2006; Kabilan, 2003a, 2003b; Bowman et al. 2000). However, an interesting finding of this study was the sharing of experiences, which entailed not only the sharing of experiences but also learning from those experiences, and then reconstructing existing knowledge and ideas and subsequently improving their quality in the shape of new ideas that were discernable in the online newsletters produced. Kabilan (2005b) defines this process as the practice of reconfiguring and refining new knowledge that is accomplished by individuals working together in a community of practice (Figure 2) where "personal experiences and regimes of competence interact closely, and the tension of that close interaction" is kept alive (Wenger, 1998, p. 251-2).

The four components in the model – being autonomous and making collective decisions, exploring possibilities, discussing to enhance quality of ideas, and networking outside own community to enrich those ideas – are also the key elements that are inherent within the novelty, structure and benefits of CLVE. In the same model, the four practices of reconfiguring and refining knowledge – learning together and from each other, constructing knowledge, analysing critically and evaluating knowledge, and sharing the knowledge – are also evident amongst the teachers, implying that CLVE had, in one way or another, assisted the teachers to reconfigure and refine their knowledge (existing ones or gained new ones). Hence, CLVE can be likened to a community of practice that is a "privileged locus for the creation of knowledge" (Wenger, 1998, p. 214).

Another aspect of professional development that was enriched is the socialisation of teachers in CLVE (within and between groups). The teachers recognised and duly emphasised their own commitment level and also that of others. As such, CLVE easily enabled them to build and expand their own networks of peers, mainly because the teachers understood their responsibilities to their own online community, that is, IG. Through this network, though the teachers worked autonomously and independently, they also worked together with others and made collective decisions in order to complete the tasks given. Learning through CLVE is produced by the socialising events between members of the IG and thus, the magnitude and significance of socialisation in CLVE should not be underestimated, because the membership and the interactions in the IG provided "the definition, the direction and

the power of the community" (Resta, Allen & Noonan, 2003, p. 34). CLVE, therefore, is a "mutual developmental process between communities and individuals, one that goes beyond mere socialisation" (Wenger, 1998, p. 263).
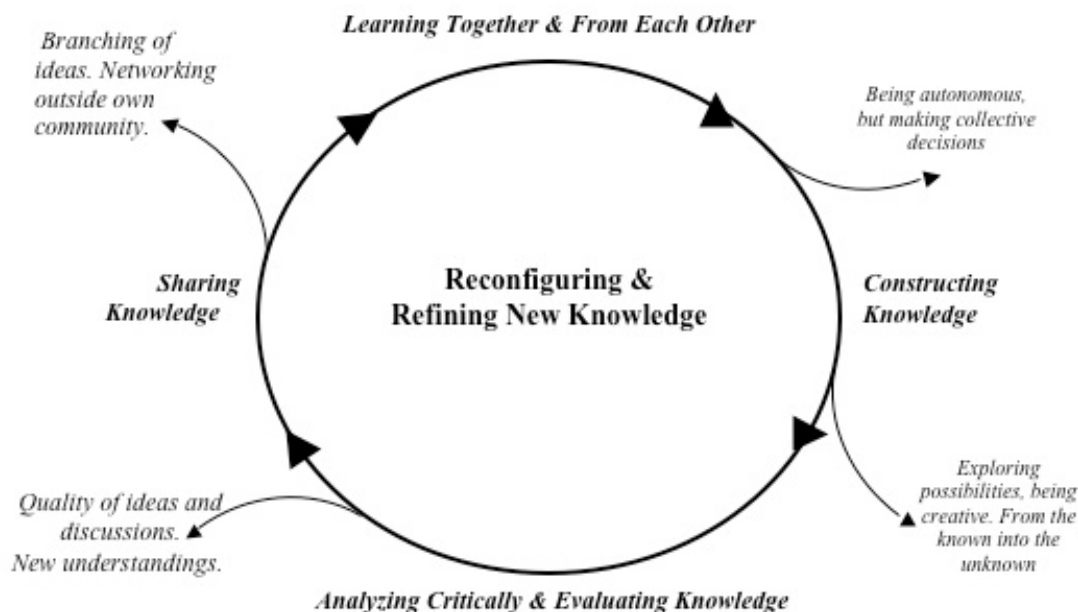

Figure 2. The practice of reconfiguring and refining knowledge in a community of practice (Kabilan, 2005b)

CONCLUSION

In terms of the professional development of the English language teachers, the CLVE project was very successful. Most of them gained rich information and valuable experiences in the use of the Internet and computer networks for professional development. Their experiences were meaningful, engaging, relevant and contributed positively to their development and progress as English language teachers. Nonetheless, the project had its difficulties and problems, especially in respect of matters related to technology (technical). Many participants reported difficulties in terms of accessing the Internet as the connection was unreliable at all three universities, and this limited their active engagement with their peers from other universities, and hence, at times, they had to resort to calling their IG members when needed.

Another limitation was the computing skills of the participants – some were practically illiterate in terms of Internet use and know-how. These participants had to spend a considerable amount of time learning about the Internet and creating email accounts, while other Internet-literate participants were "miles ahead in terms of the project" (USM 14). On the other hand, the outcome was tremendously enriching for most and, inspiring for some who were alien to the use of technology and ICT for educational purposes, as they learned more about the Internet and its uses. There were participants who had a negative perception of the project and stated that the benefits were minimal and the experience was not entirely fulfilling, with many of them citing the time factor and limited access to the Internet as major hindrances. For future

projects of this nature, the issues of Internet access and reliability will have to be addressed, as will ensuring that all participants have similar computing skills so that each can contribute meaningfully to the project.

A noteworthy implication of this study is the imperative of providing the opportunity to teachers to be engaged in an authentic online task. It is essential that teacher education managers and planners allow teachers to recognise the value and importance of ICT for professional development aims, by integrating authentic online collaboration projects into the curriculum. Such an inclusion can facilitate in educating teachers who have difficulties in seeing the benefits of ICT (or computing skills) in a more meaningful educational context. As Redmond and Albion (2005) stress, "the use of ICT in education should be as authentic as possible, a reflection of the use in our society" (p. 6). Otherwise, the initiative of using ICT for learning and professional development purposes will fail to attract interest and sustain teachers' active involvement in their professional development.

The implementation of an authentic online task will also ensure that the teaching of computing skills to teachers are not taken for granted, as not all teachers know how to utilise computers or the Internet effectively. It cannot (and should not) be assumed that teachers will be able to integrate ICT in teaching and learning processes without any kind of assistance or training (Redmond & Albion, 2005). With an authentic online task, teachers will be able to use ICT and more importantly, put into practice their ICT knowledge and skills and thus improve on it in the long run. Subsequently and over time, this practice will assist English language teachers in thinking of ways to effectively incorporate ICT into the teaching and learning of English. But as highlighted earlier, limited access to computers and connectivity to the Internet remain as two of the biggest hurdles for teachers to use such facilities meaningfully.

Though CLVE is foremost an online collaboration project with an academic aim (that is, grading), it is also a professional development programme that impacted the teachers' classroom practice. And for many of the teachers, it moulded and streamlined their thoughts on future classroom practices that would be meaningful and effective. Perhaps English language teacher education programmes should also consider the inclusion of "real" professional development activities as an effective operative process that can seriously challenge pre-service teachers' existing beliefs, ideas and practices in teaching the language. This CLVE project also reaffirms the importance of expanding the role of technology in foreign language teacher education programs, as highlighted by Luke and Britten (2007), whereby "teacher candidates must be taught to use technology…must also experience successful and meaningful technology integration in their own lives and in their own classes at the university" (p. 264). Measures of this kind may well be more successful in producing better English language teachers.

This study has been based on pre-service teachers at local universities in Malaysia. Future research should focus on authentic tasks and in-service teachers collaborating with fellow teachers from other areas or schools in Malaysia, or even with teachers from other countries. Since new online platforms have emerged and are gaining popularity, such as *Facebook*, *Academia.edu* and *Linkedin*, research should also focus on the use of these popular online platforms as tools that educators can utilise for their online professional development projects.

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