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From Rural China to Canada: Communities of Practice to Support a Teacher Professional Development Study Program Abroad

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Abstract

Study abroad (SA) professional development (PD) programs for teachers of English as a foreign language have been key to the implementation of student-centered practices in rural China. This study uses a qualitative approach to examine the experiences of a group of English teachers from Yunnan Province who received PD training in Canada in 2016. Drawing on Wenger's (2002) theory of communities of practice (CoP), we explore how the formation of diverse teacher communities impact the SA learning experience. The findings reveal that, even though a cohort of teachers were exposed to the same curriculum that emphasized collaborative learning, sharing and self-reflective practices, a top-down structured CoP formed in Beijing allowed for a small bottom-up community to form by a select group of Chinese teachers. Wenger's characteristics of a community of practice were present (domain, community, practice) in the small CoP, members were exceptionally motivated and committed to their professional development as language teachers, to sharing and learning inside and outside the classroom, and to working together with colleagues back home. The participants also reported how institutional logistics and responsibilities to the program administrators in Beijing presented challenges to the operation and functioning of the small bottom-up community.

English language education has been considered the key to the economic development and modernization of China (Liu, 2011; Zhang & Liu, 2014). As a result, two national reforms in English language teaching (ELT) were implemented in 2001 and 2003 to shift ELT pedagogy from a grammar focused traditional teacher centered model to a student-centered communicative approach (Li & Edwards, 2013). To this effect, study abroad (SA) programs have been critical for the implementation of such reforms, especially in underdeveloped areas in China where linguistic, cultural, economic, and technological resources in ELT are limited. As such, the central government has sent teachers of English from impoverished rural communities in the West China to ELT professional development in English speaking countries, such as Canada, the UK, the US, and Australia with the objective of improving teacher English language

proficiency and training teachers in innovative teaching approaches such as the Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) and Task Based Learning (TBL) (Wang, 2014).

This paper reports on one such professional development program, the West China Project (WCP) for ELT teachers from Yunnan Province. The program is unique in the fact that it involved collaboration between multiple stakeholders, the University of Ottawa (UoO), the Chinese Scholarship Council (CSC) and Beijing Language and Culture University (BLCU) and the Embassy of China in Ottawa, and included dual sites, BLCU with one month of intensive training in April, then immersion at the University of Ottawa for three months from May-July. Over the course of four years (2015-2018) over 243 teachers participated in the program.

This study focuses on a particular cohort, 2016, and one aspect of the teachers' study abroad experience, that is, professional networks and teaching communities that were formed during the PD program. More specifically, we consider the relevance of the Wenger Community of Practice (CoP) framework and the extent to which the SA teaching community of the 2016 cohort fits the CoP model.

Study Abroad Programs for Chinese EFL Teachers

With the proliferation of English language SA programs over the past two decades, there has also been growing research interest in the educational, linguistic, and professional development that SA can offer in-service language teachers. Studies show that SA experiences of Chinese teachers have improved English language proficiency, knowledge of language teaching methods, and intercultural competences (Burnaby & Sun, 1989; Li & Edwards, 2017; Wang, 2014). Moreover, SA programs also play a role in the development of Chinese teachers' identity and language awareness, specifically, how they conceptualize different varieties of English and how they see themselves as language users in an English-speaking context (Wang, 2014).

Despite the positive impact of SA programs in the professional lives of teachers, one of the main challenges has been the transferability of the methods they learn abroad in their local contexts. Western methods such as the CLT traditionally have been perceived as non-transferable and more useful in ESL rather than EFL contexts (Li & Edwards, 2013). Returning Chinese teachers from SA programs feel that the implementation of CLT is limited by their own linguistic and sociocultural competences and the pressure they receive from colleagues who see communicative practice through games and interactive activities as non-serious teaching and learning. This view of communicative practice extends from the longstanding tradition in Chinese language education that privileges grammar and form focused teaching and learning (Hu, 2002). As such, Chinese teachers who complete professional development courses abroad feel that there is a mismatch between the training they receive and the language teaching contexts and working conditions that await them back home (Pawan & Pu, 2019).

Despite some professional tensions that the returning teachers face in their home institutions, they also experience many benefits as a result of their SA participation. Li and Edwards (2013; 2014; 2017) have examined the positive impact of SA programs on the teaching practices of teachers from Western China upon their return to their communities. Even though the situation of the Chinese educational context is complex, teachers who participated in SA programs in the UK were able to implement and "reinvent" (Li & Edwards, 2013, p. 400) innovative techniques and approaches that foster collaboration and peer learning. Teachers felt that their professional role

shifted from authoritative to mentor and paid more attention to the learners' needs. The Chinese teachers who saw that Western models could not be fully implemented developed awareness of their local context and adapted the techniques and approaches learned abroad. Similarly, Pawan and Pu (2019) looked at this interplay between what teachers learn abroad and the reality of their language classrooms. Looking at this issue from the point of view of glocalization (i.e. the external and the local), Pawan and Pu (2019) found that returning teachers from Yunnan Province, developed decision making strategies based on their understanding of what works in their local contexts. This empowered them to adapt their professional, pedagogical and critical thinking levels. Yet, despite being open to innovation and change, Chinese teachers who get trained abroad still feel insecure and pressured to disseminate the knowledge acquired abroad in their local communities through professional development knowledge mobilization (Li & Edwards, 2014, 2017).

Theoretical Framework

Teacher Communities

Teacher communities (TCs) are critical for the professional development of teachers (Vangrieken, Meredith, Packer, Kyndt, 2017). In their daily practice, teachers engage in diverse collaborative "learning activities" (p. 48) that positively impact their practices and their students' achievement. According to Vangrieken's team (2017), there are three types of TCs: formal, member-oriented and formative.

Formal communities are top-down generated TCs "from government initiatives" (p. 52) and have short term pre-determined goals which are set to achieve national governmental standards. These TCs "are restricted to a specific time frame, and follow a strict agenda" (Vangrieken et al., 2017, p. 53). Formal TCs include teachers and experts from outside the community hired to "transfer knowledge to teachers" (p. 52). While formal TCs are established by a macro entity, member-oriented bottom-up TCs are formed and developed at a local school level by teachers and principals. These TCs share diverse continuous goals that aim at empowering teachers. For instance, teachers share ideas about teaching and teaching strategies, develop resources, lesson plans, conduct research and provide feedback (Vangrieken et al., 2017). Finally, in formative TCs goals are pre-determined as they develop organically "throughout their operation" (p. 53). Teachers who voluntarily join formative TCs seek support to improve their teaching and discuss specific issues at a specific time.

Communities of Practice within a Teacher Community

Another type of teacher community is what Wenger (1998) coined as Communities of Practice (CoPs). CoPs are considered the basis for the development of knowledge and materializes as the result of interaction and co-participation among members of a community (Wenger, 1998). CoPs are intrinsically formed by "groups of people who share a concern, a set of problems, or a passion about a topic, and who deepen their knowledge and expertise in this area by interacting on an ongoing basis" (Wenger, McDermott & Snyder, 2002, p. 4). Even if the time members spend working together is not constant, CoP membership is characterized by the sharing of information and advice. In teaching practice, the concept of CoPs has been fruitful in understanding the training and mentorship of novice teachers by more experienced veterans in the field (Wenger, McDermott & Snyder, 2002).

Wenger, McDermott and Snyder (2002) identify three elements that make a community a CoP: domain, community, and practice. Members in a CoP define a "shared domain of interest" and a "shared competence" (Wenger & Wenger-Trayner, 2015, p. 1). Domains or goals help the community to develop a sense of identity, establish a common purpose, and commit to the development of the CoP (Wenger, McDermott & Snyder, 2002). A solid community also engages in "joint activities and discussions, help each other, and share information" (Wenger & Wenger-Trayner, 2015, p. 2) in an environment of trust, interaction and respect. Finally, practice relates to co-participation where members develop "a shared repertoire of resources: experiences, stories, tools, ways of addressing recurring problems –in short a shared practice" (Wenger & Wenger-Trayner, 2015, p. 2). For Wenger (1998), CoPs are an inherent part of our lives. They are so familiar to us that we do not always realize their importance in the process of taking part in the social doings of a community. Multi-membership (i.e., belonging to more than one CoP) grants members the opportunity to deal with familiar problems and gives them the flexibility to face new challenges and to develop creative solutions and knowledge. This experience and background learnt in one community can be used and applied in a new CoP (Wenger, McDermott & Snyder, 2002).

Communities of Practice, ELT and SA

In the field of ELT and SA programs, few studies examine this issue of Chinese EFL teachers' SA experience from the lens of CoPs. One exception is Gleeson and Tait's (2012) study which explored how the visiting teachers from Hong Kong negotiated their learning from the study abroad experience in New Zealand and how they made this learning meaningful. Elements that characterize a CoP were found in the community developed by the Hong Kong teachers. They developed joint goals, communal life and embarked on joint practices (Wenger, 1998) that were achieved through cooperation and peer support (Gleeson & Tait, 2012). Teachers also developed common professional goals oriented towards achieving academic success and implementing in China what they learned in the SA program. They also sought to attain personal goals, such as engaging in the social life of an English-speaking context and culture.

Nevertheless, the role of CoPs is also relevant in the implementation of teaching strategies in their Chinese language classrooms (Li & Edwards, 2013). Communities created after the SA program experience have been crucial for returning teachers to adapt their newly acquired skills and knowledge, namely to emphasize a student-centered orientation. This is where knowledge mobilization is vital as a way for teachers to take part in groups or networks that facilitate discussion, reflection, mentoring, peer observation, collective lesson planning and joint curriculum design in local schools (Li & Edwards, 2013).

The WCP Program as a Teacher Community

As noted above, the program at the heart of this study was a joint endeavor between multiple stakeholders in China and Canada and involved intensive training at dual sites, BCLU in Beijing, and then University of Ottawa. Prior to travelling to Canada, the teachers participated in one-month of pre-departure training at BCLU. The BCLU training program was based on an intensive curriculum to prepare the teachers for learning in Canada which included basic "survival" English, listening and note-taking, a theoretical primer on language learning theories, ELT teaching pedagogy, and lectures on Canadian culture. In the curriculum at the University of Ottawa, the teachers followed a daily schedule (7 hours per day/5 days per week) of morning lectures on theories and issues in language education (1.5 hours/day), followed by intensive language training to develop communicative competence (2 hours/day), and in-class EFL

pedagogy workshop (3 hours/day). Furthermore, the program was collaboratively designed between the University of Ottawa instructional team and their BCLU counterparts to emphasize the "local" over the "global" (Canagarajah, 2005), the local being the Province of Yunnan, China, and global being Western pedagogy, language, and culture, so to empower rural teachers to appropriate skills, knowledge, and resources introduced in the PD program to their home contexts.

The program also included a robust extracurricular schedule. Outside of class activities included visits to local schools for class observations, and in the evenings and on the weekends, the teachers enjoyed guided visits to local museums, community events, and festivals. Despite the active itinerary planned, the visiting teachers also had opportunities to develop bottom-up TCs through informal grouping that developed naturally throughout their SA experience. In that sense, the WCP can be viewed as a top-down formal teacher community conceived by the Beijing Ministry of Education and facilitated through select institutions with designated experts assigned to train the teachers, however; we believe that even in this organizational context, there were opportunities for informal learning and the bottom-up development of CoP's. These informal learning opportunities were reported in the participant interviews and will be presented below.

As such, this study focuses on EFL teachers study abroad experience and the professional networks and teaching communities that were formed during the PD program. We consider whether the SA teaching community in our program fits the CoP model. We then look at how the formation of formal and informal communities as CoPs contributed to the teachers' study abroad experience, their English language learning and perception of their EFL teaching practices. The following research questions guide this inquiry:

- How did professional development networks evolve throughout the study abroad program?
- How do these professional development networks relate to Wenger's CoP framework?
- How did these professional development networks as CoPs contribute to the teachers' study abroad experience, their English language learning, and their EFL teaching practice?

Methodology

This study focuses on data collected from the 2016 cohort (35 visiting teachers) and is guided by a qualitative orientation (Creswell, 2014), namely participant interviews and focus group data collected in Canada (n=17). In the 2016 cohort, all participants were from the same province with a shared provincial curriculum as well as the consistency in the BCLU and University of Ottawa PD program that year. Moreover, interview and focus group protocol for the 2016 cohort focused specifically on the teachers' SA experience.

Recruitment and Data Collection in Canada

The teachers were informed about the study during the orientation session at the beginning of the program. The purpose of the study was presented in English by the program coordinator and in Mandarin by one Chinese volunteer who worked in the program. The teachers were given consent forms translated in Mandarin to indicate their wish to participate in the study. Participating teachers also asked for the interview questions beforehand. The participants were teachers from middle and high schools in Yunnan Province. Most of them were women between 35 to 45 years

of age and had between 5 to 15 years of teaching experience. At the beginning of the interview, participants were asked to select a pseudonym.

The interviews and focus groups focused on (1) the teachers' experience during the pre-departure course in Beijing, (2) their beliefs about teaching English before and at the end of the program, (3) their experiences at the host university in relation to the program curriculum (4) as well as their social, cultural, and personal experiences within the Canadian context, (5) issues about language awareness, language teaching and learning in an English-speaking context, and (5) how they saw their teaching in the future.

Interviews were conducted in English and lasted between 45 minutes and one hour. All data sets were transcribed and then imported into Transana and analyzed thematically for elements relating to the proposed research questions.

Data Analysis

To address the research questions that guide this study, the interview and focus group data was analyzed through a lens inspired by Wenger's CoP framework. We sought to identify how peer-learning took place through participants' interactions and whether these shared practices qualified as CoP's. This process of analysis involved 5 steps: (1) First, the two researchers read through the data individually making tentative notes of how the three elements of CoP's domain, community, and practice manifest in the interview and focus group data. (2) Researchers compared their preliminary coding to establish agreed upon definitions and codes linked to the three primary components of CoPs. (3) With a fixed coding protocol, the data was re-coded based on the categories defined above from which broader themes related to practice, domain, and community emerged. (4) The researchers compared their reorganization of codes and emergent themes to identify the dominant and most relevant patterns related to the social learning interactions and networks formed between teachers during the SA. (5) We then considered whether these patterns characterized CoPs or how they might relate to teacher communities.

Findings

Evidence of CoP formation emerged in the interviews and focus groups of 7 of the 17 participants. CoP characteristics of domain, community, and practice were interrelated, often overlapping in participant's descriptions of the SA experience and professional development. Key themes relating to CoPs point to: 1) the conditions, circumstances, and dynamics that facilitated the formation of CoP; 2) the shared goals and interests that sustained the CoP, and; 3) the unique characteristics of a top-down TC structure that may interfere with the organic growth of the CoP.

CoP Formation

Sharing and learning in classroom activities. The PD curriculum emphasized collaborative learning and many of the activities in the program were designed to promote sharing and self-reflective practice. To focus the curriculum on the teachers' unique instructional context, the teachers were separated into groups based on the level they taught: high school teachers formed one class, and middle/elementary teachers formed another class. Despite the division between grades instructed, some participants recognized the professional development opportunities that could be gained by sharing and collaborating with their colleagues in the other class.

For example, Jennifer, a high school teacher, describes the collaborative learning that occurred while preparing for their final task, to design and deliver a lesson plan.

Jennifer: "When we went to the other classroom with our colleagues in our team and we divided into small groups, we shared our different ideas and I learnt some good ways from them. We can learn from university teachers and our colleagues. I think it is a very good opportunity to work together".

Jennifer's account supports the presence of domain that is, of shared interests and goals, and of community, joint discussion and activities to further their professional development. The initiative taken by participants to foster a CoP within the larger TC can be seen in Ana's comments on how the teachers worked together to create a collection of lesson plans specific to each unit of their mandated textbooks:

Ana: "Maybe Rose will design one unit and then we can discuss. Toni will design another unit and we can share together. And for the methodology class, Linda and I had a chance to present the lesson plan, the listening lesson plan, but other colleagues didn't have a chance to present, so if we have more chances to present and to write more lesson plans to present to our colleagues, I think that will be better for us".

Ana's testimony reflects the shared practice among the teachers, and the effectiveness of dividing and delegating tasks to the mutual benefit of all group members. Joint enterprise between the members characterize the formation of a CoP as collective space.

Sharing and learning outside of class. Collaborative learning, and evidence of CoP formation, was not limited to the classroom activities and required tasks. Participants also maximized their opportunities to share and learn from their peers outside of class. In the excerpt below, Clara describes the first time she met her colleague and how they instantly bonded:

Clara: When we first met in Kunming [at the first program orientation meeting], we didn't know each other, but we took the same car and ate together, and share. We talk "When I teach my students, my students are like this, I do this". She had suggestions for me, and we exchanged our educational and teaching experiences. She shared with me what she learned in her training in Shanghai, and I said "Wow", maybe I can take some suggestions, advice from her experience and solve some of the problems I have with my class".

Sharing and co-learning occurred instantly between these two members. In other words, communities began to form before travelling abroad. In part, the success of this CoP can be attributed to its early formation between highly motivated members such as Clara and her colleague Jennifer.

In the focus groups, the participants also spoke about how sharing their teaching experiences was part of the social activities they enjoyed in Canada:

Christine: "…and we 3, with Linda, we 4, discover the city, visit the museum, enjoy the beautiful scenery together and taking funny pictures. Share our working experience even though we are not in the same school, maybe the problems we face are similar, the same".

From the testimony of Christine, Clara, Ana, and Jennifer, commitment to their professional development is exhibited through socially-mediated interaction and the formation of a small network of like-minded individuals. Most importantly, we note the self-initiated nature of collaboration and joint enterprise of this smaller CoP that emerged within the institutional structure of larger top-down TC being the cohort of 35 teachers in program.

Key Characteristics of CoP Members

Motivated to improve the professional practice. The interview transcript data presented above suggests that a small informal CoP took root among select PD program members. Not all of the participants' interviews voiced the same enthusiasm for peer-learning through an informal network. A dominant characteristic among the participants in the CoP was their commitment to improving their English language skills and re-invigorating their own teaching practices. This is exemplified in Christine's account of what she has learned in the program:

Christine: "I came to realize, as a teacher, especially for me, I am a new teacher with 5 years working experience. I need to make a lot of improvements and progress in my teaching. The first and most important thing for me is that I have to learn critical thinking and the teaching reflection. In the past few teaching experience, I focused on how to present the knowledge to students clearly and how to make my students focus on my instruction, but after class, I never thought am I satisfying my students' needs? Am I teaching what my students need? I never thought of these questions, but after finishing this program, I think that one of the most impressive improvements for me is critical thinking…that will push all the teachers to move forward".

Most poignant in Christine's reflection is the transformative effect the program had on her teaching practice and positionality as a teacher. Indeed, Chirstine's account of the impact on the SA program is exceptional; however, this desire for professional self-improvement was very much associated with their commitment to their improving their students' learning.

Inspired to help their students. A central theme in the CoP driving the teachers' professional development was the desire to improve their teaching/learning conditions. As such, a common narrative among the CoP members was a commitment to change. For instance, Laura discusses the collective challenges that her and her colleagues as EFL teachers in rural China face.

Laura: "During the program I've thought about my teaching. It is difficult for me to make the students think, to remember the vocabulary. Writing is difficult. Also, it is difficult for **us** to express ourselves. We have no chance to express ourselves in English. I think maybe as teachers, we are not good examples because we also cannot communicate in English. For all of the English teachers to go abroad is just a dream. For so many teachers they teach English maybe their whole life but they never spoken to a foreigner and very few foreigners come to our country. Maybe we need to create some environment to make the students speak English".

Laura brings to light the reality that many participants face in teaching English in rural China. The lack of opportunity to hear and use English meant that the teachers participating in the SA would be a vital resource once they returned home. Their experience living and studying abroad grants them an opportunity that few of their local colleagues could enjoy. This privilege inspired the CoP members to concentrate their efforts on learning to improve the overall good of their rural students. As Justin adds: "And the resources sharing is good for rural students, it gives equal education opportunities like the city area students." Indeed, there is a note of socio-economic justice underlying the motivation among CoP members.

Many of the CoP members worked in rural impoverished communities. In an education system where, academic performance determines students' educational opportunities, and subsequent employment, the participants believed that by improving students' achievement on standardized English language test, through their own language skills and pedagogy gain while abroad, they would also be contributing to a better future.

Another commonality among the participants who formed a CoP was the ambition to continue working together to disseminate their new knowledge with their colleagues and respective schools back home.

Christine: "All the information we can share that, great books about teaching classroom management, share with our colleagues… for example, next year I will share my experience to the next teacher and help to train the new teacher with the first year working teacher. So if I can use Edmodo very well, and if I am familiar with how to make a portfolio, then I can share all these skills and techniques with my leaders. They can organize all the teachers and suggest all the teachers do the thing and so we can build a platform sharing the materials and the books our school made for our students.

Within a CoP, practice is a shared repertoire of knowledge, experiences, tools, and resources. While all the participants in the SA program had access to the same curricular materials, concrete plans to disseminate their newly acquired knowledge and skills with their colleagues back home was a common theme within the CoP members. This is one element that distinguishes between those that we define as CoP members within the broader TC of the top-down program.

Challenges to formation and development of CoP

Tasks and responsibilities to program administrators in Beijing. While the top-down structure of the formal teaching community allowed for a small CoP to form within the larger SA cohort, the participants also mentioned how institutional logistics and responsibilities to the program administrators in Beijing presented challenges to the operation of the CoP. More

specifically, the visiting teachers were required to complete multiple tasks and projects while abroad, and these responsibilities proved to be overwhelming.

Charles: "The instructors provided us with a lot of websites and materials. And the student that want to know more they can download and learn by themselves, and the teachers that do not want to push themselves so hard, they will not do that…I read the book about management about the classroom. That book is very useful but I didn't finish. We have lots of tasks from Beijing and we did not have time to read the books…. the stuff we find most interesting and useful"

Pressed for time, some of the CoP members felt they did not have enough time to engage and actively participate in the informal professional network. One such task was collecting as many online or print materials as possible as some of this content was not readily available in China. Instead, they had to devote their time and energy to meeting more immediate deadlines and responsibilities determined by the official program organizers. While these additional tasks were also related to EFL teacher professional development and the SA experience, they differed in terms of self-designed initiatives of the smaller informal CoP, namely to address the more practical day-to-day aspects of the challenges they face in teaching EFL in China.

Discussion

From interviews and focus groups conducted with the 2016 cohort, we can see a small professional development program that can be characterized as a CoP that formed between 7 participants (Jennifer, Anna, Clara, Christine, Laura, Justin, and Charles). This CoP centered on a common domain to improve their English language proficiency, to improve their teaching practice, to improve their students' learning, and more broadly, to share what they learned with their colleagues back home to improve ELT pedagogy. The small CoP also involved joint enterprise derived from shared practices, experiences and resources among EFL teachers in rural Western China. As a nationally funded project, the CoP of Yunnan EFL teachers on a SA in Canada was made possible through a larger top-down network established by the program administrators in Beijing. While an overwhelming majority of the participants in the SA program expressed gains in their English language proficiency, knowledge of ELT pedagogy, and confidence to improve their student English language learning as a result of the program, the select participants involved in the CoP were exceptionally motivated and committed to their professional development as language teachers. These CoP members often went beyond the curricular expectations of the WCP instructors by seeking additional learning material, exercising meticulous care in preparing their tasks and projects, and consistently critiquing, reflecting, and building on all the resources made available to them to optimize their professional development experience. As such, these participants reported a profound commitment to improving language education not only for the students they teach on a daily basis but also at the institutional level within their school boards and districts.

The data presented focuses on seven participants which indicates that not all visiting teachers experienced the PD program in the same way. This point draws attention to how PD programs and TCs can benefit participants to different degrees. One shared characteristic among the most motivated and productive participants in the SA program was that they took their learning and PD into their own hands. The curriculum and structure of the formal top-down TC established by the Beijing government, BCLU, and the University of Ottawa provided the conditions to ignite passion and mobilize these seven teachers. Arguably, when TESOL SA programs, such as the

WCP, are built on principles of collaboration, reflection, and transferability of knowledge and skills, then informal CoPs can take root. In other words, teachers must recognize the benefits of socially-mediated peer learning in order to collectively initiate grass-root level innovation. For example, two years after returning to China from the study abroad program, Justin sent a friendly email to update the lead researcher on a PD online network that was formed while in Ottawa[1]:

> *This English corner was set up in about June, 2016 when we were in Ottawa, Canada. We did it mainly because we hoped it would benefit all the teachers from Yunnan, China.We made an environment where we could practice more our oral English. After coming back to China, we still think it is necessary for us to go on with our English journey. Just like what you encouraged us in your farewell letter. "Studying in Canada is just the beginning". At first, there were only about a dozen in this online chatting room, but little by little, more and more English lovers joined us. We talked about something we like, such as teaching, travelling and so on. Sometimes I just give a topic, and people talk about it. In the following days, l will try to take some steps to help make our English corner more lively. 1. Take turns to give a topic each day and ask a member to work as a host or hostess, who is responsible for a certain period. 2.Try to invite more native speakers to join us.*

The English corner was an idea shared by the instructors in the ELT pedagogy class where a section of the EFL classroom could be deemed an English-only zone and students would enter that space with the intention of speaking only in English. Once back in China and working in the respective schools spread out across Yunnan Province, the English corner transformed into an online space on Wechat. In this context, the teachers from the 2016 cohort (and new members invited into the site) visited the English Corner to remain in contact, to support and encourage each other's English language use, to share information, to ask for professional advice, and to expand their network and practice. Returning to the CoP framework that guides this study, the creation of the English Corner space years after the SA experience provides evidence of the strong bond and commitment to further their own professional development between several participants.

Limitations and directions for further research

Justin's comments point to future directions for further research: what happens to these small informal CoPs after the SA period? From Gleeson and Tait's (2012) study, the CoP formed during the SA period dissolved once participants returned to their daily routines and practices of their home context. Another important avenue of research is to consider how CoPs support the challenges (as described by Li and Edwards (2014) and Pawan and Pu (2019)) that returning teachers face in applying the skills and knowledge gained through the SA program to their home context.

Indeed, there is a need for further research on the potential for CoPs to enhance SA. Our exploratory study only hints at how CoPs may develop and operate within larger federally-funded TCs. Future investigation may attempt to map the parameters of a CoP to identify what particular variables lend to formation of bottom-up learning networks, how membership and organization is determined, and how CoP's evolve over time and space. Ultimately, for TESOL SA program developers and researchers, the CoP framework may be a fruitful means to optimize and extend PD learning from within the confines of structured programs to real world application.

[1] Justin gave the researchers consent to use his email in this paper.

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