

# The Sustainability of Community of Practice: The Case of English as a Foreign Language Teachers at Taif University, Saudi Arabia

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This paper reports on a qualitative study that is a follow-up to the research undertaken on CoP in my Ph.D. study. The study, which was conducted at Taif University, Saudi Arabia, aimed to enhance the instructional practices of eight male English as a foreign language (EFL) teachers about corrective feedback. In one of its phases, the study investigated the implementation of Community of Practice (CoP) as a form of professional development (PD) for Taif University EFL teachers. However, the Ph.D. study did not investigate the sustainability of CoP due to the limited time frame of the study. Therefore, in the current study the researcher interviewed the eight EFL male teachers 18 months after the original Ph.D. study was conducted. The current study has investigated the sustainability and the continuation of CoP after the researcher had left. The results showed that the teachers conducted only one CoP meeting after the researcher's departure and that some promises made by the teachers had not been achieved, such as the creation of an electronic CoP. Furthermore, the teachers reported some difficulties that hindered the continuation of the CoP and thus led to its dissolution at that time. The results of the current study have provided some suggestions about how CoP as a form of PD could be sustained in such a context. Recommendations are made for both policy makers and EFL teachers at Taif University.

*Keywords:* English as a foreign language (EFL), Community of Practice (CoP), university teachers, professional development (PD)

## Introduction

Enhancing and improving teachers' instructional practices are not easy tasks (Althobaiti, 2012). Specifically, enhancing tertiary teachers' awareness and instructional practices must be given considerable attention. One way of enhancement is via professional development (PD) sessions (Laksov, Mann, & Dahlgren, 2008; Lawrence & Sankey, 2008). The PD should suit the needs of teachers as well as students (Richard & Farrell, 2005). This is achieved by exploring teachers' thoughts and perceptions about their training needs, and then tailoring PD programmes to their training needs (Guskey, 2000). Thus, the Ph.D. study sought teachers' beliefs and reported on their instructional practices in 2010 by distributing a survey-based questionnaire to male English as a foreign language (EFL) teachers at all Saudi universities in order to give a general overview of their understanding of instructional practices for the provision of oral corrective feedback. In addition, the survey-based questionnaire helped to design suitable starting materials for the teachers in the PD sessions,

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which were conducted at a later stage.

The survey-based questionnaire revealed most of the EFL university teachers in Saudi Arabia had either a lack of understanding or an arbitrary understanding about the provision of oral error correction techniques. Moreover, the survey-based questionnaire showed a diversity of opinions amongst the EFL teachers with regard to the provision of oral error correction. Such diversity provided the researcher with a good grasp of the instructional practice of the provision of oral error correction in the Saudi university context. It also helped with planning and designing an appropriate PD model. The planning stage of the PD model took six months and considered two main issues: the improvement of teachers' instructional practices, and the contextual atmosphere of tertiary teachers' training/PD. The context of the teacher training (or PD) was trainer-centred, which means it relied on the presence of the trainer (Althobaiti, 2012). Therefore, Community of Practice (CoP) was chosen as a form of PD. As a study-based training session or PD session, the teachers' beliefs and perceptions were sought both during and after the PD sessions. The teachers had positive perceptions about the CoP and the way it was planned and delivered in a context where teachers are considered dominant and omniscient (Khan, 2011).

The PD model was designed to be both trainer-driven and learner-driven. It aimed to suit the context of teacher training in the Saudi higher education context where PD and teacher training programs are led and chaired by experts. The PD design also considered the essence of CoP where learners (i.e., teachers in this case are considered of learners of teaching) are given responsibility for their learning. Thus, the PD is designed to encourage teachers' participation, interaction, and reflection. Such features or characteristics were not previously part of the context of Saudi EFL university teacher training (to the best of the researcher's knowledge).

The designed PD model in the form of CoP comprised 10 meetings/sessions; the length of the sessions ranged from 80 to 100 minutes, depending on the discussions and the teachers' availability. The teachers believed these meetings enhanced their awareness of certain English teaching skills, specifically, the provision of oral error correction. Eight teachers participated in these sessions and showed great interest. They shared their experiences with their colleagues, reflected on their colleagues' experiences, and shared ideas and concerns encountered in their classes. The teachers were given the chance to generate a list of the practices on which they agreed; they then incorporated them into their instructional practices. In doing so, the teachers connected theory to practice and were able to bridge their lack of knowledge as they reported in the study (Althobaiti, 2012). In other words, they could connect what they knew in CoP to what they did in their classrooms.

As a part of the investigation, the teachers' perceptions were again sought two months after the last PD sessions they had about the CoP. Specifically, the teachers were asked about their involvement in the CoP and their continuity in it. Most of the teachers came up with similar answers, such as exams were approaching at that time and they could not continue meeting as CoP members anymore after the researcher's departure to finalize his Ph.D. study. Thus, the CoP was dissolved.

In 2013, the researcher decided to revisit the CoP at Taif University and investigated the continuity of the CoP amongst the eight Taif university EFL teachers 18 months after finishing his data collection in 2011. It is hoped that this investigation will contribute to the revival of CoP and provide more insights about the PD of EFL teachers at Taif University in particular and all Saudi universities in general. The following section touches briefly on the notion of CoP as a form of PD.

It is important to clarify what is meant by sustainability in this study. It refers to the continuity of CoP as a form of PD over a reasonable period of time that allows teachers to receive and exchange knowledge, share experience, problems, and find solutions in order to be able to incorporate them into their teaching. In addition, sustainability refers to the factors that help teachers continue CoP, including the establishment of a mutual engagement, joint enterprise, and shared repertoire. Also, it refers to teacher development factors for which Taif University administrative staff are responsible, such as the initiation, design, coordination, and sustainment of the PD sessions.

### **CoP**

CoP as a term was first introduced by Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger in 1991 (Wenger, 1998). Eight years later, they extended the concept of CoP to the fields of organizational learning, business, government, and development associations (Wenger, 2006). Importantly, they also applied CoP to the domain of education (Wenger, 2006).

Wenger (1998) defined CoP as “groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly” (p. 6). CoP is a form of social learning that allows learners to cooperate with each other by sharing their experiences, ideas, best practices, problems, and the search for and implementation of solutions into their teaching (Buckley & Du Toit, 2010; Wenger, 2006). These elements are what Wenger (1998) means in his description of the three main characteristics of learning within CoPs: “mutual engagement, understanding and tuning their enterprise, and developing [and sharing their] repertoire” (p. 95).

A CoP as a means of PD appears to encourage the learners’ involvement in their learning via interaction, participation, and reflection. These characteristics are considered valuable to introduce PD to EFL university teachers in a Saudi context. A CoP that included these qualities would be useful to enhance teachers’ knowledge about their instructional practices and help them connect what they had in the PD to what they did in their classes. Also, CoP as a form of PD is one way of improving teachers’ instructional practices that, in turn, will achieve students’ ultimate benefits (Morrissey, 2000).

### **Sustainability of CoP**

The CoP has been selected to replace the traditional uni-directional PD sessions characterized by a one-shot delivery (Richards & Farrell, 2005). They usually last for short periods and do not provide teachers with the chance to adopt what they learn in the PD to use in their classes (Guskey, 2000; Kennedy, 2005). Such PD sessions are characterized by a lack of sustainability as well (Althobaiti, 2012). It has been shown that after finishing this sort of PD, teachers often revert to their old habits and instructional practices (Wang, 2010). Some of the reasons were that these PD sessions do not provide teachers with sufficient opportunity to be mutually engaged with sharing their ideas, exchanging problems, and solving problems encountered in their classes (Wenger, 2006). These sessions also provided teachers with little time to plan to implement these solutions in their teaching (Ellis, 2010).

Mutual engagement is considered an important factor in sustaining a CoP (Wenger, McDermott, & Snyder, 2002). Teachers need to establish mutual trust, mutual respect, fair distribution of learning responsibilities, and control over their individual learning (Hawkins, 2008). In addition, the relatedness of PD sessions to teachers’ needs make PD both sustainable and ongoing (Richards & Farrell, 2005). The characteristics of CoP, including teachers’ reflection, cooperation, interaction, and the connection of their knowledge to their instructional

practices, are believed to lead to a more sustainable CoP (Althobaiti, 2012).

However, the existence of a facilitator (i.e., expert) is necessary to make CoP sustainable (Wang, 2010). Furthermore, organizational administration is needed to continue CoPs and enhance this kind of PD amongst teachers. The facilitator needs to raise teachers' awareness that sustainability of PD and, specifically, CoP is a part of lifelong learning required to keep them up to date, and not a means of garnering career security or a compulsory task one must perform.

The scarcity of research investigating the sustainability of CoP in higher education institutions indicates that little is known about the establishment of sustainable CoPs (Bolam, McMahon, Still, Thomas, & Wallace, 2005). However, there is a growing interest as to how to incorporate a thorough understanding of how EFL university teachers' training programs are organized and sustained. Specifically, at Taif University, the teacher development administrative staff make every effort to plan teachers' training and PD and make it sustainable and ongoing (Taif University Deanship of Development, 2014). Recently, this issue has gained importance in the context of all Saudi tertiary institutions. However, more effort is required to explore the reasons, as this study does, that may contribute to or hinder the sustainability of PD in Saudi context.

### **Significance of the Study and Research Questions**

It is hoped this study provides a deeper understanding of the sustainability of CoP at Taif University by exploring the reasons that contributed to teachers' decisions to continue or quit their CoP (studied in 2011) and the possibility of joining the CoP again in 2014. Such an investigation is hoped to be a starting point toward establishing a sustainable CoP in the English Department at Taif University, which, in turn, may provide insights on two levels: on the Taif University teacher development administrative level (i.e., departmental and stake holder level) and on the instructional practices level. The main research question and its subquestions are as follows:

- (1) What do EFL Taif University teachers' believe about the sustainability of CoP?
- (2) What are the factors that helped and/or hindered the sustainability of CoP?
- (3) What do teachers suggest for the sustainability of CoP?
- (4) What do teachers think about the role of teacher development administrative staff at Taif University with regard to the sustainability of CoP?

The following section explains the method and procedures of the study.

### **Method and Procedures**

This section describes the design of the study, the study setting and participants, the data instruments and procedure, and, finally, the data analysis. The description starts with the context of the study.

The study was conducted in 2013 in the Foreign Languages Department (FLD) at Taif University. Given the fact that the current study is a follow up study, the same eight teachers selected for the 2011 study were asked to participate in the current study. These teachers were contacted and their permission sought after obtaining permission from the FLD to conduct the study. For pragmatic reasons, the researcher was given permission as a member of staff at the FLD. After obtaining the teachers' permission to participate in the study, suitable interview times were arranged and conducted at their ease and convenience.

The researcher employed purposive sampling to select three participants for reporting the results of the case study. Purposive sampling enables a researcher to select a group of participants with specific characteristics or with a range of experiences (Teddle & Tashakkori, 2009). Also, due to the space provided for

this paper, the researcher focuses on three participants whose answers typify the responses reported by the remaining participants. As noted, the teachers were selected because of their participation in the 2011 CoP. The participants' identifying information is confidential, so the teachers were allocated pseudonyms. The first teacher holds a Ph.D. and has more than 18 years' experience teaching EFL university students. The second selected teacher holds an MA and has eight years of teaching experience, while the third has a BA and four years' experience teaching EFL. Such diversity in qualifications and years of teaching experience is believed to provide a deeper understanding of the sustainability of CoP in Taif University.

### **Study Design**

The researcher decided to conduct this study qualitatively, preferring to further investigate and extend his 2011 efforts to explore whether or not CoP is sustainable at Taif University. The use of the case study as a form of research has been adopted to provide richer and deeper descriptions of the teachers' participation in professional development, their involvement in a CoP, and their efforts in continuing the CoP (Simons, 2009).

### **Instruments**

Data were collected through a semi-structured interview (that is, a face-to-face interview). An interview is considered a powerful instrument that can be used to collect information to understand participants' points of view and beliefs (Best & Kahn, 1998), as well as to understand their perspectives on their experiences (Mason, 2002). A semi-structured interview has the potential to elicit more details and clarifications via some additional spontaneous questions developed by an interviewer (Drever, 1995, 2003). The semi-structured interview as a data collection instrument was chosen as it facilitates the creation of a friendly atmosphere between the researcher and the interviewee. This, in turn, may help the researcher explore teachers' perceptions and ideas more deeply (Drever, 2003) than could be done via the questionnaire-based survey. The semi-structured interview main questions revolve around the following topics: (1) teachers' participation in the CoP in 2011; (2) whether or not they continued meeting with CoP members after the researcher's departure; (3) main factors that helped the CoP to continue; (4) main factors that hindered the continuity of the CoP; (5) the possibility of joining the CoP again this year in 2014; (6) how, where, and when teachers prefer a CoP to be conducted; (7) the launch of an online platform for CoP and its potential to make a CoP cooperative and sustainable; and (8) the role of teacher development administrative staff at Taif University and how they may make a CoP more sustainable.

### **Data Coding and Analysis**

The interviews were transcribed, saved as Microsoft Word documents, and then analyzed. Data were treated confidentially and de-identified, and the teachers were allocated pseudonyms. After multiple readings of the transcriptions, a systematic pattern of coding was used to establish general themes. First, initial categories were identified, followed by descriptive codes, and, finally, interpretive codes were established (that is, more abstract themes) (Miles & Huberman, 1994). The emergent codes are organized in a way that answers the research questions.

To ensure the trustworthiness of the data transcription and analysis, teachers were given the transcription and asked to read them to ensure what was represented was what they really wanted to say. In addition, a friend, a professional researcher in the same field of study, was asked to read and provide a thorough critique of all the stages of the study, including the literature review, methods, analysis, and the interpretation and discussion.

Thus, the research questions were used to guide the analysis. To recap, this section described the method of the study, as well as the participants and study setting, the study design instruments and procedures, and the data analysis. The results of the study are presented in the following section.

## Results

This section presents the results of the analysis in the context of the research questions. Three common themes emerge from the analysis: teachers' perceptions about the sustainability of CoPs in general, the possibility of a CoP in 2014, and the role of the university administration in the sustainability of a CoP. Supporting evidence is provided throughout the results discussion in the form of direct quotes from the individual's data. These quotes are referenced according to their data source, the transcript page number, and the transcript line number. All names used here are pseudonyms to protect the participants' anonymity.

Almost all the EFL Taif University teachers showed positive perceptions about their participation in the 2011 CoP. Radi commented, "It was a fruitful practice that helped us share our experiences in teaching in general and at the FLD in particular. It was a productive academic practice that was based on collective wisdom" (Interview, p. 1, ll. 10-12). However, other teachers expressed a contradictory view about the CoP and its impact on the instructional practice; for instance, Khalid admitted, "I think it was good to talk about teaching-learning issues but [it] seems in vain as the effect does not reach classrooms" (Interview, p. 3, ll. 121-122).

The teachers also stated that CoP was a kind of teacher PD that they had not previously experienced during their academic career, with the exception of Khalid, who said he had been part of a small discussion group with his colleagues when he was tutoring at a London university while studying for his master's degree.

As to the sustainability of CoP, the participating EFL Taif University teachers stated that the 2011 CoP was dissolved after the researcher's departure. The teachers did not refer to any factors that contributed to the dissolution of the CoP. However, they shared some views as to possible hindrances to the CoP's sustainability. The reasons the teachers mentioned revolved around four issues: the heavy teaching and academic responsibilities, including the supervision of students' academic progress and enrolment; the lack of collegial support; the lack of administrative support; and the absence of a facilitator, which they felt had a significant impact.

Unexpectedly, Khalid stated that the reason why most of the teachers did not continue the CoP was because they felt it lacked relevance to what they do and they had no need for it; he commented that, "Many might have thought it unneeded and irrelevant or not something of immediate importance" (Interview, p. 3, ll. 132-133).

The possibility of reviving the CoP in 2014 was endorsed by many teachers who, without reservation, expressed their interest in joining a CoP at anytime, starting from this semester. However, they wanted to acknowledge the role of the department administration in order to be provided with some support, such as the allocation of space for the CoP meetings as well as time in their schedules, preferably in the morning. Also, some of the teachers requested a "smart room", one that is fully equipped with a smart board, projector, microphones, audio-video recording, and an internet facility.

In their answers regarding the possibility of launching an online CoP as an alternative to the physical CoP at FLD, teachers had various views and suggestions. Many of the teachers liked the idea and suggested having a Facebook group and page connected to a Twitter account, a channel on YouTube, and a WhatsApp group. They further commented that launching social platform access would facilitate the process of PD and make the CoP

more sustainable. Regarding the adoption of Web 2 programs and applications, Fareed stated that such platforms “would act as a virtual meeting place, and could be used for maintaining [PD] and useful references for our CoP, and any working documents that we would produce” (Interview, p. 3, ll. 100-103). However, Khalid was less optimistic about the online platforms and argued that online “platforms don’t work in traditional contexts” (Interview, p. 4, l. 154). He believed that even if teachers show interest in activating and being involved in a virtual or online CoP, they would not continue to use it.

The teachers demonstrated a heavy reliance on the university’s teacher development administration and expected a lot of it and, specifically, the administration of the FLD. All of the teachers held the responsibility of initiating, arranging, running, and following the PD sessions, whether they are a CoP or any other form of PD on departmental administration and university administration.

### Discussion

The section discusses the main results of the research questions and is based on three themes that emerged from the analysis. The three themes are: the EFL Taif University teachers’ beliefs and perceptions about the sustainability of CoP, the possibility of the online CoP, and the expectations of the teacher development administrative staff at Taif University. The results are briefly summarized, followed by an interpretation of each in light of the literature.

For the most part, the teachers stated that their participation in the 2011 CoP was both fruitful and advantageous and that the CoP had allowed them to share ideas, experiences, instructional practices, problems encountered, and find solutions to these problems. These advantages represent the characteristics of the CoP, which include mutual engagement, building a skills reservoir, and running a joint enterprise, as suggested by Wenger (1998, 2006).

It is of little surprise that one teacher mentioned that the effort put into the CoP seemed to be in vain because the benefits were not transmitted from the CoP into his teaching, meaning it was not related to his needs. This result is an accurate reflection of the CoP and teacher PD literature in that, in order for any PD efforts to succeed and have an impact in a real context, they must be needs related (Ellis, 2010; Guskey, 2000; Khan, 2011; Richards & Farrell, 2005). This result is in contrast to the findings of Andrews and Lewis (2004), which is that the development of learning communities of teacher training enhances the knowledge base of the community members and the results have a significant impact in their classrooms.

This diversity of opinion is in line with Althobaiti’s (2012) findings where the teachers expressed opposing opinions with regard to the usefulness of CoP. However, it should be noted that there were fewer teachers who stated that CoP was not useful as compared to those who endorsed CoP and its usefulness.

The dissolution of the 2011 CoP occurred because of lack of time due to teaching loads, a lack of collegial and departmental support, and the absence of the catalyst, that is, the researcher who founded and facilitated the CoP. These results found by Althobaiti (2012) are corroborated by Wang (2010) who found the same results; in both studies, both CoPs dissolved upon the departure of the researcher. Also, both studies reported that administrative support and collegial encouragement hindered the sustainability of the CoP. Wenger et al. (2002) and Wenger and Snyder (2000) also found that their CoP faded away due to members’ lack of interest to attend.

The establishment of an online CoP was endorsed by most of the teachers who showed an interest in joining a virtual CoP. They expressed the view that a virtual CoP may save time and effort, as well as

contribute to the mutual engagement and trust which strengthen teachers' relationships and, in turn, encourage them to exchange their ideas and experiences. Virtual CoPs could make teacher PD easier and longer lasting, which would result in improved teaching practices (Morrissey, 2000).

However, Khalid did not perceive the online CoP as a feasible option, due to the teachers' lack of readiness to deal with a virtual PD facility from within a traditional context. Presumably, Khalid was commenting on some teachers' unenthusiastic responses to offers to participate in PD sessions. This finding may bring Khan's (2011) argument to light when he said that some Saudi EFL teachers fail to take up PD offerings, possibly due to the egos of some academics who like to be seen as knowledgeable experts and therefore turn down PD opportunities. This, of course, has the unfortunate result of isolating those same academics in their "ivory towers", to the detriment of the learning community (Buckley & Du Toit, 2010).

The teachers argued that teacher development administrative staff at Taif University are fully responsible to encourage the teachers to take part in PD sessions, whether they are CoPs or other forms of PD. To facilitate the uptake of teacher PD, the teachers asked for a lightening of their teaching, academic supervision, and administrative loads, as well as the provision of PD facilities such as fully equipped smart rooms and access to online resources. These findings are in line with those of Althobaiti (2012), Wang (2010), and Davis (1993), all of whom argued that teaching and other academic responsibilities can be detrimental to teachers' further learning as there is little time left for PD. Thus, policy makers should consider such issues when planning PD programs for their teaching staff. Indeed, teaching staff deserve more care and encouragement.

This section discussed the results with regard to the main themes that emerged from the analysis. The following section is the conclusion. The limitations of Study 1 and Study 2, followed by the implications of the results for further research and practice, are also presented. The chapter ends with a conclusion for both studies.

## **Implications and Limitations**

### **Implications for Future Research**

Efforts for any further research on the issue of CoP and its sustainability should be accompanied by an invitation to a CoP session in order to compare what teachers say with the reality of CoP in practice. Also, researchers are encouraged to include female teachers in future investigation and explore their willingness to take part in CoPs, including online ones.

### **Implications for Policy Makers and PD Designers**

Teachers are the cornerstones of teaching, which is the soul of university life, and they deserve more care and attention at the planning level. It is known that university makes every effort and strives to achieve excellency and ensure development and quality. The Saudi government supports all higher education institutions to a high standard, and Taif University is no exception. However, there are some gaps in the planning of teachers' development for which there needs to be some compensation and consideration; this must start from the initial planning through to the development of the CoP and the establishment of online platforms where teachers can meet online, using, for example, Blackboard and other Web 2 programmes and applications.

Teachers should be reminded that the main goal of the teaching process is the students' achievement (Guskey, 2005). Therefore, to prepare good students, every effort must be made to keep pace with the latest teaching methods. Teachers should be given incentives to pursue their learning as professionals. For instance,



they might be offered a reduction in teaching time and other academic responsibilities to allow them to attend PD sessions; alternatively, incentives to pursue PD could include rewards, extra evaluation marks, points counted towards future career promotions, or public announcement of their names on an honor board on the University Website or in other publications. In addition, teachers should be encouraged to be aware and keep abreast of the latest teaching practices and to understand the importance of PD opportunities. Teachers may also be encouraged to take part in the planning and delivering of their PD; once teachers feel they are involved, they will be committed. Importantly, teachers should be encouraged to participate in the PD sessions voluntarily, which will help to make PD an ongoing and sustainable process, rather than a compulsory single session.

Teachers' enthusiasm and involvement for PD may decrease or fade if they feel there are no real benefits for their teaching or solutions to their problems and concerns, as Khalid reported. Thus, within CoP meetings and planning, teachers' varying needs and differing viewpoints need to be dealt with carefully and with understanding, as these differences are important factors that contribute to the success of the CoP form of PD. As Wenger (1998) stated, "The CoP is not a haven of togetherness or an island of intimacy" (p. 18). Thus, these challenges and diversity of opinions are regarded as important characteristics in the formation of a healthy CoP (Wenger, 1998, 2006).

### Limitations

The use of a solo source of data may be considered a limitation of this study. However, interviews are considered a powerful tool for extracting teachers' beliefs and thoughts about issues under investigation. Also, the use of interviews is justified due to the fact that the current study is a follow up study on a study where a similar methodology was used. Although the study only interviewed eight teachers, this was beneficial rather than a limitation, as it allowed the researcher to investigate the issue of CoP sustainability deeply and to obtain rich detail from the participants.

### Conclusion

In spite of the fact that the 2011 CoP was not sustained at Taif University, this study is considered both insightful and contributive. It explored in-depth the reasons that led to the dissolution of the CoP, and it provided some suggestions for establishing an alternative, virtual CoP using Web 2 programmes and applications. The study also discussed some administrative issues that are believed to contribute to the sustainability of CoP. Thus, such an investigation should assist in raising policy makers' awareness about the barriers to the sustainability of CoP. Knowledge of the barriers which may hinder or prevent a CoP from continuing will help the policy makers to overcome them in the future. The results of this study should be kept on record for each Taif University development program or any other Saudi universities organizational program to benefit all learners with their continued PD.

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