



A phenomenological study of an international teaching practicum: Pre-service teachers' experiences of professional development



Muhammad Kamarul Kabilan*

School of Educational Studies, Universiti Sains Malaysia, 11800 Penang, Malaysia

HIGHLIGHTS

- New world views of education and culture gained in the international practicum.
- Deep understanding of educational systems enhanced teaching-learning practices.
- International practicum leads to awareness of diverse work conditions and culture.
- Length of international teaching practicum is critical for meaningful experiences.

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 4 July 2012
Received in revised form
19 June 2013
Accepted 17 July 2013

Keywords:

International teaching practicum
Teacher education
Professional development
Phenomenological study

ABSTRACT

This article reports a research project planned and organized by the School of Educational Studies of Universiti Sains Malaysia to provide an international teaching practicum experience to six pre-service teachers for six weeks in Maldives. Using qualitative data from an open-ended questionnaire and reflective journals, the six pre-service teachers' experience of professional development during their international teaching practicum is examined, analysed and described. The findings show that the six students experienced beneficial and meaningful professional development. Some challenges and limitations of the international practicum are also highlighted. Based on this study, implications for teacher education/training of TESOL/TESL teachers are suggested.

© 2013 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

1. Introduction

In a multicultural context, teachers and learners have the opportunity to learn from and about each other, and understand the different ideas and philosophies of diverse groups of individuals. By doing so, teachers and learners are able to teach and learn in an atmosphere that forges stronger relationships and facilitates better understanding of other's views, beliefs and cultures. This multicultural context is propagated by 'borderless education', which is a concept whereby the provision of education is not determined or influenced by factors related to time, space and geography (Middlehurst, 2006). In other words, education can be planned and managed anywhere and anytime, especially with the aid of technology.

The introduction of information communication technology (ICT), especially the Internet, in the field of education has

contributed to various initiatives related to the above borderless education. For instance, it has allowed educational institutions to initiate joint ventures and strategic alliances with external institutions that foster meaningful collaborations and networking (see Bowman, Boyle, Greenstone, Herndon, & Valente, 2000; Kabilan, Wan Fara & Mohamed Amin, 2011; Pawan, Paulus, Yalcin, & Ching-Fen, 2003), encourage students' learning experiences (see Looi et al., 2009; Lund, Tate, & Hyde-Robertson, 1998), empower teachers, contribute to overall school improvement, and share good practices and initiatives that are generated by teachers (Muijs & Harris, 2006). It is believed that institutional collaborations and networking will eventually lead to teacher collaboration, which is basically a critical element in the workplace condition that encompass both the "cultural and political environments" that can significantly contribute to pupils' learning, teacher development and school progress and improvement (Kelchtermans, 2006, p. 220). This notion of institutional collaborations leading to school improvement is possible due to the exchanging and sharing of ideas and practices between collaborating teachers. Discussions that transpire during the sharing sessions are ideal for the teachers to

* Tel.: +60 4 6532966, +60 12 3490305 (mobile); fax: +60 4 6572907.
E-mail addresses: kabilan@usm.my, m.k.kabillan@gmail.com.

gain new ideas, refine and reconstruct existing knowledge and practices, and construct new knowledge and practices related to teaching and learning. These ideas, knowledge and practices contribute to school change and improvement, if practised and monitored by the participating teachers.

In addition to the above benefits, the international acknowledgement and recognition that an educational institution gains will spur many institutions to initiate and develop collaboration and networking with other international institutions. This motivation, at most times, is guided and driven by the economic and political objectives of a government that wishes to leave its mark in the international setting and increase and strengthen its relationships with other countries (Callan, 2000; Chan & Dimmock, 2008; Luukkonen, Persson, & Sivertsen, 1992). For example, in Europe, the European Commission (EC) sees “international collaboration at all levels (as opposed to harmonisation or competition)” as a key characteristic of European higher education, which should focus on developing “greater political weight with increased impact on a wider scale” (Keeling, 2006, p. 208) and therefore, become “the most dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world” (Keeling, 2006, p. 217). This means that the political will and educational policies of a country may become the determining factors that encourage (or discourage) collaboration of institutions in an international context.

In the Malaysian context, human capital development is identified as a focal point of globalization and transformation that will lead to the education of “a new generation of Malaysians who are able to engage actively in the global world” (MOHE, 2007, p. 49). The concept of human capital development as a component of globalization has also been the emphasis of numerous higher educational institutions around the world – Philippines (Symaco, 2011), Uganda (Bunoti, 2011), Australia (Hazelkorn, 2010) and Finland (Kyro, 2006). It is extremely vital that students develop global perspectives, and other related critical knowledge and skills, which can be attained through increased student mobility and exchange during their tertiary education, particularly in an internationalised curriculum (MOHE, 2007; Nilsson, 2003).

With the above initiatives and vision in mind, the School of Educational Studies of Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM) embarked upon a research-cum-international teaching practicum project with three secondary schools in Maldives, in collaboration with Villa College (VC), a premier university in Maldives specializing in the field of education. The aim of this initiative is to empower the selected pre-service teachers with skills and knowledge that are associated with learning, teaching and experiencing in the globalization era and in an international context.

The Literature underpins pre-service teachers’ professional development as an important area that needs critical attention. Professional development has the ability to move teachers towards a more professional stance in their contributions and understandings as future practicing teachers (Sutherland, Howard, & Markauskaite, 2010) and help them develop a sense of professional community (Sim, 2005). Through this research, the university aims to identify the pre-service teachers’ professional development experiences and find ways to further improve the current practices of teaching practicum and thus, enhance the teacher education programme. It has to be emphasized that the aim of this study is not to examine skills and knowledge of the pre-service teachers per se, but to identify and investigate professional development experiences that are beneficial to these future English language teachers as a result of their international teaching practicum. For the purpose of this paper, the concept ‘beneficial professional development experiences’ is defined as pre-service teachers’ perceived gains of professional development that are extracted and derived from their experiences of teaching in the

Maldivian schools. These perceived gains of professional development, based on the pre-service teachers’ experiences, are identified using the pre-service teachers’ voices and views in accordance with the phenomenological-like nature of this study. Hence, the purpose of this article is to identify, examine and describe the pre-service teachers’ perceived gains of professional development during an international teaching practicum. In order to fulfil this purpose, the paper will: (1) identify research gaps through a review of existing research on international practicum; (2) examine pre-service teachers’ experiences of professional development using the phenomenological research framework and; (3) describe the perceived gains of professional development and its implications.

2. Literature review

Many colleges and universities in the United States, as well as in other developed countries such as the United Kingdom, Canada and Australia, have initiated and developed some form of study abroad programmes (or internationalised curriculum) to enable their students to receive an international learning experience and gain relevant exposure (Thomas, 2006). These study abroad programmes, which have been initiated as early as in the 1970s, are usually in the form of student exchange programmes, short study programmes, teaching practicum, field experience, immersion programmes or even brief placements and attachments. Research indicates that such experiences are very beneficial to the students in terms of enhancing their knowledge and skills, world views and thus their cross-cultural effectiveness, coping with unfamiliar surroundings, providing a global perspective and, increasing self-reliance, self-confidence and personal well-being (see Carsello & Creaser, 1976; Carlson & Widaman, 1988; Kambutu & Nganga, 2008; Kitsantas & Meyers, 2002; Kuh & Kauffman, 1984; Lee, 2009; Malewski & Phillion, 2009; McCabe, 1994; Nilsson, 2003; Pence & Macgillivray, 2008; Rodriguez, 2011). The above new knowledge and skills (as well as other benefits) that are gained during international practicums lead to pre-service teachers’ increased professional competence (e.g. Barkhuizen & Feryok, 2006; Ward & Ward, 2003; Willard-Holt, 2001). These competencies are essential elements of professional development that a teacher should possess and be able to translate into everyday teaching and learning practices in the classroom settings for the benefit of learning and development of students. Using the conceptual change theory used by Wilson (2001), Maynes, Allison, and Julien-Schultz (2012) hypothesise that these competencies can be linked to the changes in the pre-service teachers’ perspectives as a direct result of their experiences in the international settings. This significantly contributes to the pre-service teachers’ ‘personal and professional paradigm shifts’ (Maynes et al., 2012, p. 72) and enhances their cognitive and affective competencies by: (1) reflecting critically on their international experiences (2); integrating knowledge learned from that experience with knowledge possessed and (3); making decisions and taking actions on the insights acquired from critical reflections (Brookfield, 1998). Using Brookfield’s (1995) conceptualization of critical reflections may explain the pre-service teachers’ practices and actions during their international practicum. It is hoped that, during the international practicum, Brookfield’s (1995) ideas will assist and lead the pre-service teachers to:

1. realize that teaching is embedded in ideologies;
2. see themselves as professionals who are constantly developing and growing;
3. make the connection between their concerns as teachers, students’ learning experiences and the overarching educational process;

4. create and manage a democratic learning environment for students and themselves;
5. discover themselves as an authentic and relevant entity in the international educational environment/settings and;
6. interpret and create knowledge and actions from their experiences.

Critical reflections, in the context of international practicum and professional development, include analysing, reconsidering and questioning experiences of the pre-service teachers' teaching in an international setting (Murray & Kujundzic, 2005). These practices of reflections are integral components of teachers' learning and development (Brookfield, 2009). In order to be meaningful and valuable, this new learning in the international contexts 'needs to cause a restructuring of the existing understandings about working in the cognitive structure in order to lead to changes of practice at work' (Moon, 1999, p. 179). The new learning may also provide the opportunities for the pre-service teachers to 'examine assumptions, frame problems, and develop their pedagogical muscle' (Hammerness, Darling-Hammond, & Shulman, 2002, p. 240) with regards to the Maldivian schools' contexts and classroom settings.

Apart from cognitive and affective competencies, in the 1980s and onwards, researchers began to identify the international teaching experience as a way of preparing teachers to understand diversity (Mahan, 1985; Mahan, & Stachowski, 1990). As a result, students who returned from study abroad programs were more appreciative of different cultures, more mature and independent. Sahin's (2008) study of Turkish graduate students teaching in high schools in the United States strengthened the student teachers' beliefs about their own educational systems, and thus become more optimistic and positive about Turkish educational system. These findings, according to Cushner and Mahon (2002), mirror the "increased cultural awareness and improved self-efficacy, as well as professional development in terms of global mindedness" (p. 44), which can be linked directly to international teaching experiences.

Realistically, however, not all pre-service teachers can benefit from the international teaching practicum and experiences due to constraints and limitations such as financial capability, time and demanding course requirements. In addition, there are also real concerns that these international teaching experiences do not always achieve their pre-determined goals (Talbur, 2009); they may also lead to negative trends and practices during the period. Mahan and Stachowski (1990), for instance, found that the US teachers placed in the United Kingdom were not well prepared in many aspects, and therefore did not perform well enough during the international stint. Sahin (2008) described how Turkish student teachers faced organizational problems whereby they shouldered many responsibilities, and their mentor teachers lacked commitment and did not have a clear expectation of the entire programme. Other problems and untoward experiences include unnecessary parental pressure at school (Pence & Macgillivray, 2008), pre-service teachers' negative perceptions of curriculum of the host school (Pence & Macgillivray, 2008), and pre-service teachers' excess enthusiasm and idealism that may lead to a negative understanding of local culture (Willard-Holt, 2001). In terms of understanding local culture, though, this is usually the main critical and desired outcome of an international experience. Malewski and Phillion (2009) warned that this kind of experience "does not invariably lead to shared cultural understandings or interpretations" (p. 58). The culture of the host community and the worldviews of the pre-service teachers may influence and pressure each other negatively. In addition, as Otten (2000) questioned earlier, "Do domestic students benefit from internationalisation?" (p. 16) – a question that is very difficult to answer since researchers

tend to focus on the pre-service teachers, and not the host community i.e. surrounding community, teachers and learners.

The above review implies that more studies are needed to ascertain and comprehend the nature, benefits and limitations of an international teaching practicum for pre-service teachers, particularly for their professional development and future endeavours. There are many studies (as highlighted above) that focus on pre-service teachers who are trained in the developed/western/English speaking countries, and who are sent to do their practicum in developing countries or in countries whose learners do not speak English as their first language, or even as a second language. However, there is a scarcity of studies on the experiences of pre-service English language teachers trained in Asian contexts or contexts where English is not the primary or main language of communication, who are sent to do their teaching practicum in a foreign country.

The issue of language, in particular the English language, is critical because in an international teaching practicum it is one of the sociocultural elements that a pre-service teacher can utilize to better relate to the local population in the host country (Malewski & Phillion, 2009). It could also become a factor that poses a strong challenge (Myles, Cheng, & Wang, 2006; Sahin, 2008) that distances him/her from the mainstream host society (Trilokekar & Kukar, 2011). In terms of language and language learning, past studies show that international teaching practicums contribute to pre-service teachers' improvement in language (Sahin, 2008), better appreciation of language differences (Pence & Macgillivray, 2008), and heightened language awareness and knowledge (Habron, 2007). Habron (2007) theorizes that these language gains during international teaching practicums are possible as the pre-service teachers are given the freedom to gain teaching experiences and 'build on their language awareness without assessment pressure' (p. 231). Also, as implied by various studies (eg. Csizér & Kormos, 2008; Dornyei & Csizér, 2005), when one is being engaged in intercultural/multicultural contexts, he/she is driven to be motivated and willing to learn and practice the language in context. In addition, since the pre-service teachers will have taught in two different environments, there will be improvement in terms of language and language learning:

... two habitats, including two languages, two cultures, two sets of customs, two sets of teacher and learner behaviours. That is, existing teacher awareness from previous 'at home' experiences form one layer of awareness, and the international experiences form another layer superimposed on top create the possibility of teachers becoming more aware of language, learning and other educational issues (Habron, 2007, p. 231)

A literature review yields very few such documented studies in the Asian contexts. The available ones are based in the context of Hong Kong pre-service teacher education. A good example would be Bodycott and Crew (2000) study of Hong Kong pre-service teachers, who self-report socio-cultural, language and educational gains as a result of their international teaching practicum experiences in Australia and Canada. Second is Lee's (2009) study, also of Hong Kong pre-service teachers, who participate in a six-week language immersion programme in Auckland, New Zealand. It is reported that the pre-service teachers have gained a higher level of appreciating cultural differences, greater sense of independence and confidence, and a deep understanding of various pedagogical skills. Though these international practicum experiences of Asian pre-service teachers appear to be valuable, the lack of studies in the Asian context means that these findings are still raw and cannot be verified at this juncture. More studies are needed so that the researchers can be conclusive in the interpretation of the data obtained and confirm similar themes and patterns of behaviour and

practices of Asian pre-service teachers during their international practicum (Lee, 2009). Thus, the present study will also attempt to fill the void or gap in literature in terms of pre-service teachers from developing countries (especially Asian countries) and their experiences of an international teaching practicum. Hence, this will be a significant study that provides distinctive findings based on the context and environment of the study, in which English is not used as the main language of communication in the educational systems (i.e., in both Malaysia and Maldives).

3. Methods

3.1. Research background, setting & method

The international practicum was carried out in Maldives, where six pre-service teachers specializing in the Teaching of English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) were placed in three Maldivian schools – School A, School B and School C – and each school agreed to host two USM students for the international practicum. The two male pre-service teachers were placed in an all-boys school, whereas the remaining four females were assigned to two all-female schools; two to each school. Each of them was assigned a mentor teacher (also known as an ‘expert teacher’ in the Maldivian school system).

The practicum began in the second week of April and ended in the third week of May 2011 (a total of 6 weeks of teaching). The six pre-service teachers were asked to teach two English language classes each (a total of 160 min of teaching per-week) in their respective schools. All 6 pre-service teachers taught the Higher Secondary Level 1 Classes (the pupils’ average age was 15 years). (Note: The Maldivian schools used the International General Certificate of Secondary Education (IGCSE) as their syllabus for English language teaching and learning). Apart from teaching, the pre-service teachers were also required to carry out responsibilities and official duties as other teachers are required to do in the Maldivian schools. During this period of six weeks, the mentors observed their respective mentees at least three times, while the supervisors from VC met and observed the pre-service teachers at least once each during the six weeks and carried out discussions with them after the observation sessions. However, the VC supervisors maintained communication (via emails and mobile phones) with the pre-service teachers on a weekly basis, at a minimum. The mentors, on the other hand, were in touch with the six pre-service teachers almost on a daily basis, with frequent face to face meetings and discussions. The USM research team (six lecturers) visited the schools at the end of the teaching practicum (Week 5), whereby each pre-service teacher was observed once during their lessons. The USM research team held discussions, meetings and interviews with the pre-service teachers, mentors, other teachers and the principals of the schools. All these activities in Week 5 were done with the main intention of gaining an understanding of the pre-service teachers’ overall performance and experiences during their international teaching practicum.

This is a descriptive qualitative study with phenomenological undertones that is concerned with the examination of pre-service teachers’ experiences during an international teaching practicum. This method was chosen due to the nature of the study, whereby personal knowledge and subjectivity of the pre-service teachers’ professional development during the international practicum were closely scrutinized using their own personal perspectives, voices and interpretations (Lester, 1999). The purpose of this method was to comprehend the perceived gains and benefits of an international teaching practicum, as described by the pre-service teachers (Groenewald, 2004) – ‘to provide a description of human experience as it is experienced by the person herself’ (Bentz & Shapiro,

1998, p. 96). In addition, this study examined the pre-service teachers’ direct experiences during their international practicum; they were taken at face value and were not influenced or determined by external elements (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2002).

3.2. Participants

The six pre-service TESOL teachers who participated in the international teaching practicum were final year students, who had completed their 4-year programme that included 120 units of courses (i.e. 37 courses). The participants of the study were identified and selected from 36 pre-service teachers, who volunteered to participate in the international teaching practicum. The 36 pre-service teachers were interviewed by a panel of TESOL lecturers and researchers. The interviews were conducted to identify and determine their personalities, abilities, inter-personal skills and commitment to teaching and learning. Several weeks after the interview, they were required to complete a writing test that focused mainly on their writing skills, argumentative writing, reflective and thinking skills, and pedagogical knowledge. Based on the interview and written test, 12 students were shortlisted, and were required to conduct microteaching sessions, which were observed and graded by the TESOL lecturers. In addition, abilities, characteristics and personalities of the students were also considered, especially during the interviews, and these were taken into account in the final assessment of the students’ performance in the microteaching session. Based on these procedures, the top six students (from the finalized 12 students) were selected – two males. Prior to the international teaching practicum in Maldives, the six pre-service teachers completed their local teaching practicum (10 weeks) in different schools in the Northern peninsular of Malaysia. The main aim of the local practicum was to give some teaching experience to the six students as they had never taught in schools before. For the purposes of identification and data analysis in this paper, the two male teachers will be known as Teacher N and Teacher F, whereas the female teachers will be known Teacher A, Teacher E, Teacher S and Teacher Y.

3.3. Data collection methods and analysis

Open-ended questionnaires and reflective journals were used to collect data in order to discern the teachers’ voices and experiences as part of the phenomenological research process. Interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) of data could be used on written data obtained from the above two data collection methods. Czerniak and Schriver (1994), based on Bogdan and Biklen (1982) and Tesch (1990), explained, “phenomenological researchers could delineate all ‘meaning units’ through the text, code the units that are relevant to the research questions, and cluster themes to form descriptive conclusions” (p. 79). This research procedure implies that data obtained from any appropriate form of written texts would have phenomenological undertones. Previous studies with similar phenomenological traces and nuances (including the types of data collection methods) as in this study have been reported by researchers from various fields (see Corey, Hammond, & Frazer, 2009; Czerniak & Schriver, 1994; Hellemans et al., 2011; Kimmel, 1989; Reardon & Grogan, 2011). Using these two methods of data collection, the pre-service teachers reported their perceived gains of professional development, which were derived from their experiences of teaching in the Maldivian schools. Hence the professional development gains mentioned by the pre-service teachers in this study, which are presented, discussed and concluded in this paper, would refer to their perceived gains of professional development derived from their experiences of teaching in the Maldivian schools.

The open-ended questionnaire was the main method in gathering data to answer the research questions of the study – What are the pre-service teachers' perceived gains in professional development during an international teaching practicum? The students were asked to directly respond to the question with concrete explanations and examples based on their international teaching practicum experiences in the Maldives. The open-ended questionnaire was given to the students a week after completing their international teaching practicum in Maldives. They had ample time to reflect on their “lived experience” of professional development and its benefits when they were teaching in the Maldivian schools. This time factor for reflection was the main reason why the questionnaire was used as a data collection method. Excerpts and data derived from this method were identified by ‘OEQ’ (Open-ended Questionnaire).

Entries from the students' reflective journal were also used to support the students' responses to the research question. The reflective journal was used as a data collection tool for this study because it aided the pre-service teachers' reflective processes and documented their experiences of professional journey during the international practicum (Gil-Garcia & Cintron, 2002). Before the students left for Maldives, they were given training on how to reflect on their practices and experiences (see Appendix 1). They were required to make at least three (3) entries per-week during their international practicum on any issue that they felt pertinent to their professional development experiences, their perceived gains of professional development, and their endeavours as a future English language teacher. Excerpts and data derived from this method were identified by ‘RJ’ (Reflective Journal). It has to be mentioned here that since new teachers tend to work and think of themselves and their actions in their classrooms, during their reflections pre-service teachers may focus more on their own teaching and perhaps then slowly move on to a ‘thoughtful consideration of their students' learning’ (Hammerness et al., 2002, p. 241). And thus, their reflections may not turn out to be as critical as desired in this study but these reflective practices may be sufficient to demonstrate their “ability to evaluate their practice, to understand their students as learners, and to become strong, purposeful, teachers who think about teaching in ways that reflect the complexity and intellectual and emotional challenges of the work” (Hammerness et al., 2002, p. 242).

Data obtained from the two methods were analysed using thematic analysis, whereby the patterns and themes within the data were identified, analysed and reported by minimal organization but with rich description of data that were then used to interpret various aspects of the pre-service teachers' professional development. (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The themes for this research were identified via a 5-stage process – (i) becoming familiar with the data; (ii) generating initial codes; (iii) searching for themes; (iv) reviewing themes, and (v) defining and naming themes. Through this process, the final themes captured all elements of professional development of the pre-service teachers, and represented some level of patterned response or meaning within the pre-service teachers' professional development experiences in the international teaching practicum (Braun & Clarke, 2006). See Appendix 2 for an example of the data analysis process.

4. Findings

There are five main benefits of the international teaching practicum for the pre-service teachers' professional development, as shown by their perceived gains of professional development extracted and derived from their experiences of teaching in the Maldivian schools. However, their experiences are not entirely positive, as some challenges and limitations of the international

practicum are also highlighted by the pre-service teachers. From the general observation of the data, it has to be stressed here that not all the benefits mentioned could be attributed solely to the teachers' experiences in the international teaching practicum but the benefits could also be gained during the local teaching practicum.

4.1. Confidence in speaking and communication

The teachers indicate that they are now more confident, particularly in speaking and using the English language to communicate. According to Teacher Y, during her teaching practicum in Malaysia, she has ‘limited chance to use English’ for communication because she feels it is awkward to use English as ‘it is not the culture’ to do so. However, the experience in Maldives is totally different – she feels more confident in speaking because in the Maldivian school the English language is the only language that she can use as ‘a medium to communicate’. Teacher Y clarifies,

Most teachers are foreigners from India, Sri Lanka and some are local people (Maldivian). Since, all have different languages; we used English as medium of communication. I also need to use English with my students. Even I have difficulty to fully express myself in second language (at first), but I feel more confident to use it in public (now). My receptive skills in this language have also improved (Teacher Y, OEQ)

Teacher E concurs with Teacher Y in this respect – ‘If I spoke in Bahasa Malaysia, the students would not understand me’ and this context of language use has ‘forced (me) to speak in English only’ and as such, ‘(My) English proficiency level had increased in a way’ as ‘I am not afraid to talk to the students’ (Teacher E, RJ). Teacher E feels this is because she is exposed to the classroom situation and her teaching practices helped her a lot in gaining the confidence to speak in English (OEQ). The other two teachers agree that the context has ‘forced’ them to use English more for a wider purpose and more frequently and as such, they are able to practice the language in a more meaningful context, which subsequently instils more confidence in them to speak:

In Maldives, we didn't use our own language, so English became our first language. Day by day I gained my confidence to speak even when I made mistakes. I met a lot of difference people and able to gain confidence from the people and the environment (Teacher F, OEQ)

But, when I did the international practicum, I had no excuse to use Bahasa Malaysia during the lesson with the students. I also had to talk in English with the staff and other teachers since we cannot understand each other's language. Gradually, I began to be more confident in speaking and less cautious on making grammatical mistake while speaking. I gained my confidence in speaking because I practiced and conversed a lot in the language since I had no choice but to do so (Teacher S, RJ).

Nevertheless, for Teacher N, though the context does ‘force’ him to speak in English, it actually addresses his difficulty of teaching a group of students ‘of considerably different culture and practices’ and therefore, he becomes ‘hesitant and insecure in speaking to the students at first’, but as time progresses, he is soon ‘able to deliver successful lessons with good self-confidence’ (Teacher N, OEQ).

4.2. Teaching confidence & skills

The participants also report that their experiences of the international teaching practicum have increased their skills and confidence level in teaching. Teacher E emphasises her confidence level

has improved because she experienced a teaching practicum in Maldives where she has to 'plan out (her) lessons well although there were constraints and limitations along the way' (Teacher E, OEQ). Teacher Y also agrees that she has improved in 'planning the lesson and content of teaching' (Teacher Y, OEQ). This has a lot to do with the way the lessons are planned and taught in Maldivian schools. Teacher E explains,

I managed to plan my lessons using my own creativity to make the lessons more interesting. Even though the lessons are handout-based, I managed to incorporate some elements of games and activities, so that the students will be anticipated to learn better in the lessons...I saw myself improving in preparing and planning my lessons. My confidence level had increased (Teacher E, RJ)

Teacher S laments that she has problems in managing her time in the classroom as she is unable to finish her lessons in time or "finish up earlier from what we have planned". However, during her international teaching practicum, Teacher S is able to overcome her time management problem and she is 'able to finish up every each of my lessons in time with the guidance of my mentor teacher' (Teacher S, OEQ). During her first few lessons, she struggles with the timing, in which 'most of the time, I'm not able to do my closure' (Teacher S, RJ). Her mentor notices her weakness and guides her to become 'more time conscious' and 'avoid dragging time during discussion unless there's still more time left' (Teacher S, RJ).

Teacher S also explains the kind of mentorship that she has received,

I had a chance to sit with my mentor during marking students' book. I marked summary writing and also continuous writing. She explained to me in detail on delegation of marks for summary and the impression marking for continuous writing. Other than guiding me through marking students' work, in terms of correcting their mistakes and giving marks; she had also reminded me that it is very crucial that the teacher need to write remarks at the end of the essay. She asked me to write what I feel about the essay, what I like or dislike about it and what are the things that can be improved (Teacher N, RJ)

Teacher Y also acknowledges that her mentor guides her to mark the students' book and exam papers. 'I learn how to use symbol in marking students' essay from the guideline' where as in Malaysia, she 'marked the students work based on (her) understanding of the subject matter' (Teacher Y, OEQ). Teacher A claims the international teaching practicum has presented her with the opportunity to meet different people and teach in a new context that has made her feel like she is 'able to teach in any context' confidently (Teacher A, OEQ). She concludes,

Teaching in Malaysia nurtured my self-confidence as I started off as a teacher for the first time. Teaching in Maldives further strengthened my confidence and brought me to a higher level of confidence (Teacher A, RJ)

Teacher A mentions that she underwent a harrowing teaching experience in Malaysia but teaching in the Maldivian educational system gave her another opportunity to express herself as a teacher and educate her learners passionately.

The thing is that it (international practicum) gave me back the confidence that I lost; the passion for teaching that I absolutely lost in Malaysia – the passion, the notion and belief that I can change things. For example, in the first week, I taught 'You and Your Community', a topic on the environment. I told my girls how much environment means to me and my views and ideas of taking care of our environment. I led by example by showing them some

pictures and what could be done. I told them that they can go out and do something about their environment. It's just the mere fact that I could inspire them made me so happy beyond words because a few days later my girls came to me and said that they are planning for a beach cleanup in another island. (Teacher A, RJ)

Teacher S (OEQ) claims she is a very confident teacher after the teaching practicum in Malaysia and in Maldives, as she has experienced different sets of levels and students and is 'more comfortable' and confident to teach any level of students since she experienced 'numerous trials and errors when planning activities for the students' (OEQ). As for Teacher E, teaching in Maldives was a real challenge but it presented her with opportunities to improve herself as a teacher, and to keep pursuing her professional development beyond the international practicum:

The international practicum had really taught me to be able to teach the students more effectively as I experienced different approaches when it comes to teaching. Even after Maldives, I still think that I need to buck up and learn more, so that I will be a good English teacher in future...there were a lot of problems and struggles that I had to face when teaching the students in Maldives. A lot of doubts and dilemma were lingering in my mind. However, I believe that throughout my six weeks in Maldives, I had learnt to be stronger and my confidence level had increased to a certain extent. (Teacher E, OEQ)

4.3. Interpersonal skills

For Teacher F, Teacher E and Teacher N, the international teaching practicum has provided them the setting and opportunity to practice and enhance their interpersonal skills. Teacher E emphasises that she practiced her interpersonal skills, particularly her interaction skills. This is possible due to the obvious reason of frequent interactions with teachers, staff and students of different races, culture and identity (OEQ). Teacher E clarifies in detail,

Interacting with people was a hard thing for me to do, especially when it came to interacting with foreign people. This was because I was scared that I was not competent enough to interact with them. When I first arrived at School A, I needed to discuss with my master teacher about the approaches that I needed to use to teach the students, on what I needed to teach, and a lot of school related stuff. It took me awhile to interact a lot with my master teacher as she is a quiet lady. Anyway, I tried many ways to make her feel comfortable to talk with me about other stuff, which is related to the students.

Teacher F too states that the international teaching experience has improved his way of interacting with other people, especially those of different levels – 'teachers, head of departments, deputy principals and principal' (Teacher F, OEQ). Teacher N feels that interaction in such context is beneficial and represents a new learning experience for him that is very cultural,

While we may be used to interacting with people of diverse races in Malaysia, to interact with Malaysians require a totally different understanding of their practice to interact properly. As this is a new experience (interacting with Malaysians), it is a beneficial experience in sharing knowledge and each other's cultural stories with one another (Teacher N, RJ)

Teacher A also finds interaction, especially with the Maldivian teachers, a useful experience as it has 'enlightened (her) the insights of English teaching' whereby the good relationship established with teachers has facilitated the learning of 'many things such as how to teach and evaluate students' work efficiently' (Teacher A, RJ). As for Teacher Y, interactions with Maldivian

teachers, who 'are expatriate who come from India, Sri Lanka, and Pakistan' encourage and help her 'to share and exchange teaching ideas' (Teacher Y, OEQ). According to Teacher Y, 'the teachers are very friendly and helpful. We always talk to each other and discuss on the problem that we face in the classroom teaching. Since teachers are from different countries, we have different perspectives on how to solve problems'

4.4. *New world views of education and culture*

Teacher Y is explicit in defining the international practicum as an experience that has 'broaden my views on educational issue and (be) more open to global educational issues'. In addition, the experience has allowed her 'to experience other educational systems...(and) give new insights of educational practices' (Teacher Y, OEQ). She clarifies,

In Maldives, I experience teaching English based on IGSCSE syllabus. It is exam oriented and most of the lesson focus on preparing students with examination. I get to know how the teachers conduct their lesson and prepare the lesson together. Lesson is conducted in more interesting way in Malaysia. The lesson is more on communicative approach to enhance students' confidence to communicate in English (Teacher Y, RJ)

The other teachers appear to have similar views as Teacher Y – the comparing of educational systems and contexts and, reification of new global educational views,

Having taught in two different settings, it is only normal that I will compare the differences between them. I came to appreciate the curriculum and syllabus in Malaysia even more now. It made me think that the curriculum here (in Malaysia) is, in a way, more ideal and suitable for effective learning of the English language (Teacher N, RJ)

In Maldives, we were exposed to the new syllabus, which was totally different from Malaysia. I also learned how the syllabus was taught and implemented in the classroom to make the lesson successful (Teacher F, OEQ)

We get to understand Maldives' education system (for example, no punishment, different scheme of work, curriculum, etc). In addition, it also helps in everyday learning such as learning how to travel between places, the practices there and attempts to understand and interact in Dhivehi (though it was a big failure, it was enjoyable) (Teacher S, OEQ).

It appears that the Malaysian pre-service teachers, in general, prefer the Malaysian syllabus and the way English is taught and learned. However, some of them are not in favour of the Malaysian syllabus and approaches to teaching and learning, and acknowledge that some elements of the Maldivian system and approaches to English language teaching are much more effective. For example, Teacher A, finds the IGCSE syllabus 'really interesting and it not only stimulated the students' thinking but also my very own thinking' (Teacher A, OEQ). This is because, the themes and the worksheets used are interesting (such as 'You and Your Community' and 'Entertainment') and these give 'a vast exposure to the students and teachers'. On the contrary, she does not find the Malaysian syllabus interesting '(at least not as interesting as the syllabus used in Maldives)' and she has the opinion that the syllabus used in Malaysia (form 3, English especially) is 'very dry'. Perhaps the syllabus should take into consideration what is current and what would capture the students' interest the most' (Teacher A, RJ). Teacher A further accentuates her views on the issues of syllabus and the way English is taught in Maldives and Malaysia,

...when the girls were involved in drama, I was one of the teachers who was training them 'Othello'...I had to read up the synopsis and watch the movie together with the students and it led them into the characters and at the same time, I was thinking, how many times do we do these Shakespeare plays in Malaysia? Do we revive them in Malaysian schools? We had 'Sonnet 18' in the syllabus previously but it is no longer studied. And now it makes me reflect upon our system and their system, especially in terms of the standard of English in Malaysia. I feel like our standard is dropping. Just look at our graphic novel – where is the value of literature exactly? The way literature is taught in Malaysian schools only encourages spoon-feeding and "vomiting" out information. When are the Malaysian students going to start thinking for themselves? And when I do a reflection, I can see that we are lacking in that sense (Teacher A, RJ).

Teacher N also appreciates the fact that the Maldivian educational system gives more 'freedom' to teachers to choose 'which ever handouts we like' and then are given 'more freedom in terms of planning and executing lessons' (Teacher N, OEQ).

4.5. *Adapting to new working cultures*

As an ongoing professional development experience, the six pre-service teachers have to learn to adjust to new working cultures and conditions. They also have to adapt to the new working cultures as practiced in the Maldivian schools. For instance, Teacher Y gives an example of adapting to a networking culture,

I learn to plan proper lesson through coordination meeting in Maldives. Every Tuesday, all teachers in Grade 8 gather to discuss the lesson to be taught by the next week. All teachers are given the opportunity to suggest their material or just follow the materials prepared by the coordinator teacher. As new teacher, I learn how to plan proper English lesson that cover various language content and enhance all four language skills.

Teacher F gives a similar account of the working cultures and environment in his school that are 'totally different from Malaysia' that require cooperation between teachers, and 'work together as one department. They will have the meeting every week to make sure the lesson in that week run smoothly' (Teacher F, OEQ). Teacher A's views are very similar to Teachers Y and F but she favours the working culture in Maldives. 'I personally believe that in Maldives (particularly in the school that I had taught) the teachers are provided the space, time and room for improvement' (Teacher A, OEQ). She explains further,

The teachers in Maldives get to focus on their expert subject and do not have to teach subjects which are not related to their studies and they are not burdened with paper work like that of a teacher in Malaysia. This allows the teachers to focus on their only subject and this gives them more space and time to improve themselves and introduce better methods of teaching. Teachers in Malaysia are burdened with administration work that sometimes, they cannot even focus in their teaching. The teachers are burdened with paper work that robs their teaching time too (Teacher A, RJ).

5. **Discussions**

5.1. *Confidence in speaking and communication*

It appears that the international teaching practicum stint has enhanced the pre-service teachers' awareness of aspects of language and language teaching-learning (Freed, 2005; Harbon, 2007),

in which there are influences of culture and society of the host nation. Wright and Bolitho (1993) suggest that such awareness is valuable and can enhance pre-service teachers' confidence and thinking skills, and mould their attitudes and values. Lee (2009) too finds that international experience has turned reluctant novice Hong Kong teachers into 'confident, lively, proactive communicators in English' (p. 1098). The pre-service teachers' language development and awareness, as Habron (2007) points out, can be linked to their experiences in the international practicum and the meaningful social and formal contexts in Maldives that were presented to them in the form of teaching (working) and reflection. These meaningful contexts encompass purposeful use of the English language for authentic communication in teaching and learning in the Maldivian schools, and the authentic communication in the local communities outside school in the Maldivian society. Spolsky (1989) explains that although the society and the relevant social factors may not have direct impact on language learning, the various elements in communities and society (such as daily chores, engagements and interactions, and important national events) can have "strong and traceable indirect effects" on the pre-service teachers' language development and learning (p. 14). Wright and Bolitho (1993) too regard social elements as critical elements that can help raise the pre-service teachers' awareness of language and language learning. They also argue that the more interactive the pre-service teachers become, "the greater the possibilities for developing professional dialogue" (p. 301).

Similar to Brookfield's (1995) conceptualization of teachers' practices of critical reflections, the six pre-service teachers are able to see themselves as professionals who have become more aware of their language development and their increased confidence level in using the English language during and after the international teaching practicum. This is an indication that when teachers are given meaningful professional development opportunities and experiences, they are able to perceive and function as professionals who can continuously develop and grow.

5.2. *Teaching confidence & skills*

From the perspectives of Bandura (1977 & 1997), the six pre-service teachers, in one way or another, have gained professional development experiences through the process of observational learning in the Maldivian school environment, whereby the mentor teachers and the system in place in the schools are the perfect influential models for the pre-service teachers to follow and emulate. This observational learning has assisted the pre-service teachers to internalize new learning and experiences by: (1) carefully identifying the ones that are meaningful and discarding ones that do not contribute to their professional development (Drage, 2010); (2) associating and learning from the different kinds of students and contexts, especially the ones that are not familiar to them (i.e. the Maldivian context) (Kennedy, 1999) and; (3) negotiating between their experiences in Malaysia and Maldives and borrowing the best from both educational systems (Beynon, Ilieva, & Dichupa, 2004; Cruickshank, 2004; Moin, Breittkopf, & Schwartz, 2011).

Through the observational learning, the pre-service teachers have been cautious, taking into account other factors before deciding whether or not to emulate the models entirely or to be selective. In other words, they have been practicing vicarious reinforcement. This practice of vicarious reinforcement has brought about confidence in their teaching skills as they have more or less closely identified with the models and thus, created stronger impact on their efficacy, i.e. their self teaching confidence (Hoy, 2000).

It has to be made clear that the pedagogical practices (such as lesson planning, time management and teaching materials) in the Maldivian schools are totally different from the pedagogical

practices practiced and managed in the Malaysian educational system, especially in terms of the issues highlighted by the pre-service teachers. The Educational system in Malaysia is centralized, with many of the schools (especially the government-funded schools) religiously adhere to the curriculum and syllabus. As Malaysian students who studied in Malaysia, as well as pre-service teachers who were trained in the Malaysian context, all six pre-service teachers have no learning or teaching experience outside the Malaysian educational system. Teaching in the Maldivian schools was an eye-opener and a new learning (and teaching) experience for all of them. According to Beynon et al. (2004) their experiences with different systems may help them become familiar with a variety of classroom practices, develop the pre-service teachers' diverse identities, and provide opportunities for them to "develop new dimensions of teaching identities" (p. 442). These are further enhanced by the mentorship and support given by the expert teachers (and other fellow teachers), whereby the pre-service teachers are able to access various forms of resources and pedagogical perspectives, and practices in this community of practice of teachers. In such engagements during the international practicum, the pre-service teachers' competencies are developed and enhanced through 'the knowledgeableability of engagement; occasions for applying skills, devising solutions, and making decisions (and); problems that engage energy, creativity and inventiveness' (Wenger, 1998, p. 238). Thus, it can be postulated that the pre-service teachers' experiences and engagement (during international practicum) in different pedagogical practices in different educational environments with different students can be a key factor in developing and establishing skills and confidence in themselves. The pre-service teachers are able to interpret and create knowledge and actions from their experiences of teaching in both the Malaysian and Maldivian schools (Brookfield, 1995). Their experiences in different educational contexts have been rich and thus, delineate meaningful practices that they feel are effective and successful for a particular educational situation. In fact, some of the pre-service teachers believe that the international teaching practicum is a powerful experience that have rejuvenated their passion for teaching and learning, apart from skills and confidence.

5.3. *Interpersonal skills*

From the perspective of interpersonal skills, the findings exemplify how a community of practice engages itself in the pursuit of knowledge through interaction between members of the community. The community of practice (Wenger, 1998) characterises, as well as clarifies learning in today's teaching and learning contexts that transcend geographical boundaries and lead to globalization. It is through the interaction and engagement in the community that members (in this case, the pre-service teachers) create, share and evaluate tools, standards, generic learning designs and other aspects of learning to deepen knowledge on specific issues and skills (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, McDermott, & Snyder, 2002). This borderless learning, through the engagement of members of an international community in Maldives, is attained through the creation and management of a democratic learning environment for and by the pre-service teachers (Brookfield, 1995). The democratic learning environment is predominantly characterized by the frequent interactions with teachers, staff and students of different races, cultures and identities that have enriched the pre-service teachers' practices and experiences of their interpersonal skills. The forging of egalitarian-type relationships between the pre-service teachers and the school communities are identifiable by their: (1) mutual respect for each other; (2) learning from each other; (3) understanding of each others' cultures and; (4) adaptation to different educational perspectives and beliefs. These four

elements have somewhat contributed to the development of the pre-service teachers – personally and professionally.

5.4. *New world views of education and culture*

Since the pre-service teachers are exposed to new world views, ideas and perspectives of education that are different from their own, they are able to discern the different educational philosophies that underline the way teachers teach and the way students learn in Malaysia and Maldives. The comparisons and some of their experiences and understanding of the various philosophies enrich their knowledge, which in turn may have contributed to their own learning, development and growth as a future English language teacher. Though [Teekens \(2000\)](#) postulates that “different value system may deeply upset notions of personal and professional identity” (p. 33) in the international field experience, the pre-service teachers in this study appear to thrive upon their experiences of the different educational systems (with different ideologies and philosophies) by becoming aware of the advantages and disadvantages of both systems and how the distinct systems can be influential for the respective educational settings ([Beynon et al., 2004](#); [Cruckshank, 2004](#)). It is likely that the pre-service teachers are well-prepared, and are able to acclimatize to the local culture, syllabus and conditions very quickly. Hence, they are able to build the foundations to enrich their repertoire of teaching methods that are derived from different cultural contexts with different educational values and systems. This means that the international teaching experience has given the pre-service teachers some realization that teaching is unique, and is embedded within the ideologies and philosophies of the respective educational contexts. Therefore, they are able to make the connection between their concerns as teachers, their students’ learning experiences and the overarching educational process in Maldives ([Brookfield, 1995](#)) by interpreting, reifying and practicing the educational philosophies and ideologies in the form of appropriate teaching methods and techniques.

5.5. *Adapting to new working cultures*

Literature shows that a school’s workplace conditions can exert great influence on teachers’ professional development (see [Anderson & Kanuka, 1997](#); [Clement & Vandenberghe, 2000](#)). The working culture and conditions in Maldives have allowed the teachers to channel their energy and focus on teaching and learning. This has, in some way, shaped and contributed to their professional development journey as they are engaged in meaningful activities that are beneficial. On the contrary, the working culture and conditions in Malaysia are different, whereby most teachers are ‘reluctantly forced’ to place way too much emphasis on examinations ([Normazidah, Koo, & Hazita, 2012](#); [Pandian, 2002](#)). They tend to work within a rigid and limited time frame in order to complete the syllabus ([Pandian, 2002](#)). Whether they like it or not, they have to ignore their development as a professional as more focus has to be allocated to the summative performance of students. [Kabilan and Khan \(2012\)](#) explicates,

...in Malaysia, the main form of assessment is a national examination that requires learners to sit for at least 10–12 subjects; for each subject, learners have to register for at least 2–3 examination papers – usually in the shape of written test, oral examination and laboratory experiments. Hence, a 17-year old secondary learner in Malaysia may need to sit for 20–36 examination papers in a space of 45 days! The abilities of these learners are measured in terms of how many ‘A’ grades that they are able to obtain. Schools with the highest number of learners

with straight ‘A’ grades for all the subjects are considered as high performing schools. As such, there is an overwhelming amount of pressure on both the teachers and the students to perform. Hence, the schools prepare their learners according to the assessment format and structure of the national examination (p. 1008).

The six teachers faced a situation, which [Clement and Vandenberghe \(2000\)](#) describe as “challenges for professional development” without actually having to “abandon their autonomy” (p. 98) – in other words, the working conditions in Maldives presented the teachers with the opportunity to challenge themselves in order to improve as an English language teacher without abandoning or ignoring their teaching philosophies, beliefs and notions. Rather than breaking their motivation, the challenging working conditions and new working culture become the driving forces for the pre-service teachers to learn and adapt to the new working environment, simultaneously strengthening their existing beliefs about teaching and learning. This is previously affirmed by [Opfer, Pedder, and Lavicza \(2010\)](#), who, based on national data of teachers’ professional development in England, theorize and conclude that apart from individual influences, teachers’ learning can also be influenced by organisational conditions such as working conditions and cultures, working environment and institutional policies.

Teaching in the Maldivian schools require the six pre-service teachers to collaborate with teachers from diverse international backgrounds and work together as a unit. Hence, the pre-service teachers, including their experiences of teaching in Maldives, can be considered as authentic and relevant in the international educational environment/setting ([Brookfield, 1995](#)). Teaching in an international educational environment/setting such as Maldives represents a “genuine academic collaboration across borders” that contributes to authentic learning and development of the pre-service teachers ([Volet, 2003](#), p. 8). The pre-service teachers would not have experienced international collaboration and authentic learning if they had not taught in Maldives.

6. Implications and conclusion

As mentioned earlier, some themes that emerge from this study can also be attributed to the pre-service teachers’ experiences during the local practicum. However, several themes can only be explained by their experiences during international practicum. For example, the pre-service teachers have gained understanding of new world views of education and culture from teaching English in Maldives. They have garnered the understanding and the ability to adapt to new working cultures and the different approaches to teaching and learning that are used in the Maldivian school system. This is due to the nature of learning in the international context, which is a ‘continuous negotiation of meaning accentuated by language and inter-cultural factors’, and how well the pre-service teachers are able to ‘establish rapport and understanding among the school community’ ([Myles et al., 2006](#), p. 243). The data indicate that close relationships and mutual understanding with the expert teachers and other teachers are integral to successful bonding of the pre-service teachers and host teachers and their quick self-adjustment to the working environment of the school. This directly leads to their growth and development in terms of adapting to working cultures.

Teaching in Maldives has developed the pre-service teachers’ knowledge, skills and cultural competencies that include teaching contents to diverse learners, affirming diversity in classrooms, and knowing the cultures of school and its students and teachers ([Ladson-Billings, 2001](#); in [Achinstein & Athanases, 2005](#)). In

addition, engaging with Maldivian students created challenges for the Malaysian pre-service teachers in the classroom. The engagements played a key role in developing their ‘professional skills in teaching in a diverse classroom’ and ‘the ability to deal more effectively with international students and new expectations’ (Hamza, 2010, p. 57). As personal growth is interrelated and intertwined with professional development (Hamza, 2010), any growth would also mean meaningful and relevant professional development of the pre-service teachers. With these new capabilities and personal growth, the pre-service teachers have developed into teachers who are able to make systematic judgments and evaluations of educational systems. Driven by a meaningful professional development experiences in Maldives, their understandings of the different educational systems are sharpened and enhanced in terms of their practices of teaching and learning.

In terms of professional development of English language teachers, we cannot take for granted that pre-service language teachers will become teachers with excellent language and communication skills. The teachers in this study have become confident users of English as they ‘are forced’ to speak in English in the Maldivian schools. Such findings are not evident during the local teaching practicum in Malaysian schools since frequently, Malaysian pre-service teachers tend to communicate using the Malay language even during English language classrooms and when interacting with other English language teachers. This particular finding of the present study is distinctive if compared with similar studies that have been carried out by institutions based in the US, Canada or Australia (or other countries where English is spoken as the first language). Findings from such studies (for example, Malewski & Phillion, 2009; Rodriguez, 2011) mostly indicate the values of an international teaching practicum in broadening the pre-service teachers’ global perspectives, enhancing their ability to be able to adapt to different cultural settings in relation to teaching, and strengthening their self-confidence and beliefs in their approaches and practices of teaching and learning. However, for the Malaysian pre-service teachers, in addition to the above mentioned gains, their international teaching practicum have contributed to the pre-service teachers’ authentic communication using the English language. The international practicum has served as an informal on-going professional development session on speaking and communication that increased their confidence level due to the daily practices with the Maldivian students, teachers and local communities. The daily practices have contributed to the construction and reconstruction of their knowledge of the language, and improved their communication skills and overall language abilities. Theoretically, the pre-service teachers are “engaged in producing meaningful utterances” and, through these productions, are able to “explore the meanings of words in practice and develop an increasing ability to negotiate these meanings productively” (Wenger, 1998, p. 203). In addition, the pre-service teachers have developed into much more successful and confident users of the English language because in the Maldivian context they were afforded the freedom (Habron, 2007) to focus on the “experience of meaning” compared with the Malaysian context, in which they were more focused on the “mechanics of learning” (Wenger, 1998, p. 266)

The international teaching practicum has useful implications for pre-service teachers’ professional development and teacher education, especially when this study is based on pre-service teachers who are trained outside the Western contexts, where English is not the main language of communication. First, it is vital that future English language teachers are provided an informal, on-going and comprehensive experience of professional development in communication using English. In those professional development activities, practical and theoretical elements of public speaking and effective presentation skills should be based on constructivism,

which basically encourages construction and reconstruction of ones’ knowledge in the language (Swain & Lapkin, 1998), which according to Wertsch (1991), then leads to ‘linguistic change among and within individuals during joint activity’ (p. 39). Also crucial is the provision of an environment or atmosphere that facilitates pre-service teachers’ authentic use of the English language for interaction and communication purposes.

The second implication is that perhaps there should be two teaching practicum sessions during a pre-service teacher’s education programme. According to the six teachers, their experiences in the local practicum (1st practicum) are beneficial and act as an impetus for them to do better in the international teaching practicum (the 2nd practicum). The second practicum gives the teachers the opportunity to enrich their teaching and learning experiences as well as provide them the opportunity and platform to rectify the mistakes they made during their first practicum. The second teaching practicum is ‘an excellent opportunity for pre-service teachers to experiment and test their knowledge and skills...and their personal educational philosophies and theories’ (Kabilan, & Raja Ida, 2008, p. 87) that are developed during their first practicum.

During the international teaching practicum, the pre-service teachers are able to fall back on their experiences and reflect on their experiences (Kabilan, 2007) teaching in Malaysian schools to find solutions to the problems that they faced in Maldives. The international practicum experiences have made the pre-service teachers to be more aware of the different working conditions and cultures, as well as diverse teaching and learning philosophies, cultures and practices. In addition, the international experience has opened up more learning opportunities and has provided them the space for reinforcing effective practices that they have constructed during the first practicum. It has also supported the pre-service teachers in re-constructing knowledge and practices based on failed or ineffective practices during their first practicum, and has contributed to the pre-service teachers’ meaningful professional development experiences, to some extent. This is possible because teachers’ personal practical knowledge and experiences influence and characterize the way teachers respond and react to educational realities, perspectives and changes (Amobi, 2003; Pitsoe & Maila, 2012; Smith & Southerland, 2007), and the “eventualities of the future to deal with the challenges of the present” (Amobi, 2003, p. 25).

It would be impossible to give an international teaching experience to all students, but we can bring the international experiences to the local contexts. This can be done by placing international students and teachers as visiting teachers/scholars and fellows in the faculties, and thus organize learning and non-academic activities that would engage them within a community of practice i.e. of both teachers/lecturers and students. Another way is to engage learners within an online community of learners through online engagements; learners who are from different contexts, backgrounds, cultures and values participate in meaningful activities so that they will get an ‘international experience,’ virtually. In this respect, the use of social networking sites would engage individuals with different educational and life experiences (from different countries) in the virtual space to accommodate the cultural conditions of these diverse individuals (Zhang & Kenny, 2010).

Another implication is providers of teacher education programme, especially the teaching practicum component, should seriously consider infusing learning elements and tasks that emphasise the following practices and values: (i) mutual respect for each other (learners, other teachers, administrators etc); (ii) learning from each other; (iii) understanding each others’ cultures, beliefs, philosophies and ideologies and; (iv) adapting to different educational perspectives and beliefs. The current study indicates that the pre-service teachers show signs of maturity – personally and professionally – as a result of the above practices during their

international practicum. Understandably, during the local practicum, the pre-service teachers did not report the above four practices and values, as they are well-versed with the local culture and community, educational system and philosophies, and how the school community functions in Malaysia. Initiating academic and social based projects, specific learning tasks, and community engagement initiatives that augment the four practices/values during teaching practicum, especially, will encourage pre-service teachers to learn and refine related, appropriate and meaningful knowledge and skills. Such projects, tasks and initiatives ought to be modelled and practiced during teacher education so that prospective teachers will be able to use these skills in their future classrooms and future endeavours as teachers.

The pre-service teachers lament that the international teaching practicum was too brief. According to Teacher N,

In a way, it didn't feel like we did enough. We might be able to do and learn a lot more with more time. I think most of us spent a considerable amount of time trying to get to things, and just when we were getting familiar with things, we were a week or two away from home. It felt a bit sudden and empty, like nothing much was done in Maldives (Teacher N, OEQ).

For future research, a longer international teaching practicum should be organized i.e. between 10 and 12 weeks so that the pre-service teachers would have ample time to self-evaluate their overall performance more effectively and accurately, as well as gauge their students' learning. Also, research should examine how well they would strive in the environment where English is the first language, with different cultural values, practices and elements. Another international teaching practicum perhaps should also be carried out in a country that badly require educational assistance, or even in a war-torn country; these are the countries that will certainly offer different kinds of professional development experiences and challenges from the ones that the pre-service teachers experienced in Maldives.

The international teaching practicum is different (from the local teaching practicum) but a significant experience for the six pre-service teachers. As a group, some of their experiences are similar to each other (see the themes), but as individuals, the international teaching practicum have made an impact on their personal lived experience as a professional. For example, Teacher A is rejuvenated and claims to have regained her passion for teaching and being a teacher, whereas Teacher Y feels that she now has a broad view of education. Teacher F's concluding remarks below encapsulate the pre-service teachers' overall professional development experiences in Maldives,

I learned many new things and gained new experiences that I can't get in Malaysia. With the environment, new syllabus, new ways of teaching, I learned how the students accept outside people as a teacher... (it was) a priceless experience that I wouldn't get in Malaysia" (Teacher F, OEQ).

Supplementary data

Supplementary data related to this article can be found at <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2013.07.013>.

References

- Achinstein, B., & Athanases, S. (2005). Focusing new teachers on diversity and equity: toward a knowledge base for mentors. *Teaching and Teacher Education, 21*, 843–862.
- Amobi, F. (2003). Reflections on the transformation in a teacher educator's teaching of educational philosophy. *Teacher Education Quarterly, 30*(3), 23–32.
- Anderson, T., & Kanuka, H. (1997). On-line forums: new platforms for professional development and group collaboration. *Journal of Computer Mediated Communication, 3*(3), 1–13.
- Bandura, A. (1977). Self-efficacy: toward a unifying theory of behavioral change. *Psychological Review, 84*, 191–215.
- Bandura, A. (1997). *Self-efficacy: The exercise of control*. New York: W.H. Freeman and Company.
- Barkhuizen, G., & Feryok, A. (2006). Pre-service teachers' perceptions of a short-term international experience programme. *Asia-pacific Journal of Teacher Education, 34*(1), 115–134.
- Bentz, V., & Shapiro, J. (1998). *Mindful enquiry in social research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Beynon, J., Ilieva, R., & Dichupa, M. (2004). Re-credentialing experiences of immigrant teachers: negotiating institutional structures, professional identities and pedagogy. *Teachers and Teaching: Theory and Practice, 10*(4), 429–444.
- Bodycott, P., & Crew, V. (2000). Living the language: the value of short-term overseas English language immersion programs. *The Language Teacher, 24*(9), 27–33.
- Bogdan, R. C., & Biklen, S. K. (1982). *Qualitative research for education: An introduction to theory and methods*. Boston, MA: Allyn and Bacon.
- Bowman, I., Boyle, A., Greenstone, K., Herndon, L., & Valente, A. (2000). Connecting teachers across continents through on-line reflections and sharing. *TESOL Journal, 9*(3), 15–18.
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology, 3*, 77–101.
- Brookfield, S. D. (1995). *Becoming a critically reflective teacher*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Brookfield, S. (1998). Critically reflective practice. *Journal of Continuing Education in the Health Professions, 18*(4), 162–184.
- Brookfield, S. (2009). The concept of critical reflection: promises and contradictions. *European Journal of Social Work, 12*(3), 293–304.
- Bunoti, S. (2011). Quality of higher education in developing countries needs professional support. In *Paper presented at the 22nd international conference on higher education, Ankara, June 17–19*.
- Callan, H. (2000). Higher education internationalization strategies: of marginal significance or all-pervasive? *Higher Education in Europe, 25*(1), 15–24.
- Carlson, J., & Widaman, K. (1988). The effects of study abroad during college on attitudes towards other cultures. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations, 12*(1), 1–18.
- Carsello, C., & Creaser, J. (1976). How college students change during study abroad. *College Student Journal, 10*, 276–278.
- Chan, W., & Dimmock, C. (2008). The internationalization of universities: globalist, internationalist and translocalist models. *Journal of Research in International Education, 7*(2), 184–204.
- Clement, M., & Vandenberghe, R. (2000). Teachers' professional development: a solitary or collegial (ad)venture? *Teaching and Teacher Education, 16*, 81–101.
- Cohen, L., Manion, L., & Morrison, K. (2002). *Research methods in education* (5th ed.). London: Routledge/Falmer.
- Corey, A., Hammond, N., & Frazer, J. (2009). The experiences of health care workers employed in an Australian intensive care unit during the H1N1 influenza pandemic of 2009: a phenomenological study. *International Journal of Nursing Studies, 47*(5), 577–585.
- Cruickshank, K. (2004). Towards diversity in teacher education: teacher preparation of immigrant teachers. *European Journal of Teacher Education, 27*(2), 125–138.
- Csizer, K., & Kormos, J. (2008). The relationship of intercultural contact and language learning motivation among Hungarian students of English and German. *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development, 29*(1), 30–47.
- Cushner, K., & Mahon, J. (2002). Overseas student teaching: affecting personal, professional, and global competencies in an age of globalization. *Journal of Studies in International Education, 6*, 44–58.
- Czerniak, C., & Schriver, M. (1994). An examination of preservice science teachers' beliefs and behaviors as related to self-efficacy. *Journal of Science Teacher Education, 5*(3), 77–86.
- Dornyei, Z., & Csizer, K. (2005). The effects of intercultural contact and tourism on language attitudes and language learning motivation. *Journal of Language and Social Psychology, 24*, 327–357.
- Drage, K. (2010). Professional development: implications for Illinois career and technical education teachers. *Journal of Career and Technical Education, 25*(2), 24–37.
- Freed, B. (2005). Language learning in a study abroad context: old assumptions/new realities. In *Paper presented at the Association Internationale de Linguistique Applique (AILA) (in association with the American Association of Applied Linguistics) international conference, Madison, Wisconsin, USA. 24–30 July*.
- Gil-Garcia, A., & Cintron, Z. (2002). The reflective journal as a learning and professional development tool for teachers and administrators. In *Paper presented at the world association for case method research and application conference. July 2–5, Germany*.
- Groenewald, T. (2004). A phenomenological research design illustrated. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods, 3*(1), 1–26. Article 4. Retrieved [22 January, 2013] http://www.ualberta.ca/~iiqm/backissues/3_1/pdf/groenewald.pdf.
- Habron, L. (2007). Short-term international experiences and teacher language awareness. *International Education Journal, 8*(1), 229–243.
- Hammerness, K., Darling-Hammond, L., & Shulman, L. (2002). Toward expert thinking: how curriculum case writing prompts the development of theory-based professional knowledge in student teachers. *Teaching Education, 13*(2), 219–243.
- Hamza, A. (2010). International experience: an opportunity for professional development in higher education. *Journal of Studies in International Education, 14*(1), 50–69.

- Harbon, L. (2007). Short-term international experiences and teacher language awareness. *International Education Journal*, 8(1), 229–243.
- Hazelkorn, E. (2010). Contribution of tertiary education to human capital development, labour market and skills in the State of Victoria, Australia. In *OECD, higher education in regional and city development. The state of Victoria*. Paris: OECD.
- Hellemans, S., De Mol, J., Buysse, A., Eisler, I., Demyttenaere, K., & Lemmens, G. (2011). Therapeutic processes in multi-family groups for major depression: results of an interpretative phenomenological study. *Journal of Affective Disorders*, 134, 226–234.
- Hoy, A. (2000). Qualitative and quantitative approaches to examining efficacy in teaching and learning. In *Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American educational research association, New Orleans, LA, April 28*.
- Kabilan, M. K. (2007). English language teachers reflecting on reflections: a Malaysian experience. *TESOL Quarterly*, 41(4), 681–705.
- Kabilan, M. K., & Khan, M. (2012). Assessing pre-service English language teachers' learning using e-portfolios: Benefits, challenges and competencies gained. *Computers and Education*, 58, 1007–1020.
- Kabilan, M. K., & Raja Ida, R. I. (2008). Challenges faced and the strategies adopted by a Malaysian English language teacher during teaching practice. *English Language Teaching*, 1(1), 87–97.
- Kabilan, M. K., Wan Fara, W. A., & Mohamed Amin, E. (2011). Online collaboration of English language teachers for meaningful professional development experiences. *English Teaching: Practice & Critique*, 10(4), 94–115.
- Kambutu, J., & Lydiah, W. (2008). In these uncertain times: educators build cultural awareness through planned international experiences. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 24, 939–951.
- Keeling, R. (2006). The Bologna process and the Lisbon research agenda: the European Commission's expanding role in higher education discourse. *European Journal of Education*, 41(2), 203–223.
- Kelchtermans, G. (2006). Teacher collaboration and collegiality as workplace conditions. A review. *Zeitschrift für Pädagogik*, 52(2), 220–237.
- Kennedy, M. (1999). The role of preservice teacher education. In J. Darling-Hammond, & G. Sykes (Eds.), *Teaching as learning profession: Handbook of teaching and policy* (pp. 54–86). San Francisco: Jossey Bass.
- Kimmel, E. (1989). The experience of feminism. *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, 13(2), 133–146.
- Kitsantas, A., & Meyers, J. (2002). *Studying abroad: Does it enhance college student cross-cultural awareness?* Education Resources Information Center. ED 456648.
- Kuh, G., & Kauffman, N. F. (1984). *The impact of study abroad on personal development of college students*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University School of Education.
- Kyro, M. (2006). *Vocational education and training in Finland*. In CEDEFOP Panorama series; 130. Luxembourg: Office for Official Publications of the European Communities.
- Ladson-Billings, G. (2001). *Crossing over to canaan: The journey of new teachers in diverse classrooms*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Lave, J., & Wenger, E. (1991). *Situated learning: Legitimate peripheral participation*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Lee, J. (2009). ESL student teachers' perceptions of a short-term overseas immersion programme. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 25, 1095–1104.
- Lester, S. (1999). *An introduction to phenomenological research*. Taunton UK: Stan Lester Developments. Retrieved [22 January, 2013] <http://www.sld.demon.co.uk/resmethy.pdf>.
- Looi, C., Seow, P., Zhang, B., So, H., Chen, W., & Wong, L. (2009). Leveraging mobile technology for sustainable seamless learning: a research agenda. *British Journal of Educational Technology*, 41(2), 154–169.
- Lund, C., Tate, E., & Hyde-Robertson, B. (1998). Benefits and challenges of a graduate nursing consortium. *Nurse Educator*, 23(6), 13–16.
- Luukkonen, T., Persson, O., & Sivertsen, G. (1992). Understanding patterns of international scientific collaboration. *Science, Technology, & Human Values*, 17(1), 101–126.
- Mahan, J. (1985). Cultural learning belongs in student teaching. *Educational Horizons*, 63(4), 146–148.
- Mahan, J., & Stachowski, L. (1990). New Horizons: student teaching abroad to enrich understanding of diversity. *Action in Teacher Education*, XII(3), 13–21. Fall.
- Malewski, E., & Phillion, J. (2009). International field experiences: the impact of class, gender and race on the perceptions and experiences of preservice teachers. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 25, 52–60.
- Maynes, N., Allison, J., & Julien-Schultz, L. (2012). International practica experiences as events of influence in a teacher candidates' development. *McGill Journal of Education*, 47(1), 69–91.
- McCabe, L. T. (1994). The development of a global perspective during participation in semester at sea: a comparative global education program. *Educational Review*, 46(3), 275–276.
- Middlehurst, R. (2006). A world of borderless higher education – impact and implications. In Susan D'Antoni (Ed.), *The virtual university: Models & messages from case studies* (pp. 1–15). UNESCO.
- MOHE. (2007). *National higher education action plan, 2007–2010*. Putrajaya: Ministry of Higher Education of Malaysia.
- Moin, V., Bretkopf, A., & Schwartz, M. (2011). Teachers' views on organizational and pedagogical approaches to early bilingual education: a case study of bilingual kindergartens in Germany and Israel. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 27, 1008–1018.
- Moon, J. (1999). *Reflection in learning & professional development*. London: RoutledgeFalmer.
- Muijs, D., & Harris, A. (2006). Teacher led school improvement: teacher leadership in the UK. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 22(8), 961–972.
- Murray, M., & Kujundzic, N. (2005). *Critical reflection: A textbook for critical thinking*. Québec, Canada: McGill-Queen's University Press.
- Myles, J., Cheng, L., & Wang, H. (2006). Teaching in elementary school: perceptions of foreign-trained teacher candidates on their teaching practicum. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 22, 233–245.
- Nilsson, B. (2003). Internationalisation at home from a Swedish perspective: the case of Malmö. *Journal of Studies in International Education*, 7(1), 27–40.
- Normazidah, C. M., Koo, Y. L., & Hazita, A. (2012). Exploring English language learning and teaching in Malaysia. *GEMA Online: Journal of Language Studies*, 12(1), 35–51.
- Opfer, D., Pedder, D., & Lavicza, Z. (2010). The role of teachers' orientation to learning in professional development and change: a national study of teachers in England. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 27(2), 443–453.
- Otten, M. (2000). Impacts of cultural diversity at home. In Paul Crowther, Michael Joris, Matthias Otten, Bengt Nilsson, Hanneke Teekens, & Bernd Wächter (Eds.), *Internationalisation at home: A position paper* (pp. 15–20). European Association for International Education.
- Pandian, A. (2002). English language teaching in Malaysia today. *Asia Pacific Journal of Education*, 22(2), 35–52.
- Pawan, F., Paulus, T., Yalcin, S., & Ching-Fen, C. (2003). Online learning: patterns of engagement and interaction among in-service teachers. *Language Learning & Technology*, 7(3), 119–140.
- Pence, H., & Macgillivray, I. (2008). The impact of an international field experience on preservice teachers. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 24, 14–25.
- Pitsoe, V., & Maila, W. (2012). Towards constructivist teacher professional development. *Journal of Social Sciences*, 8(3), 318–324.
- Reardon, R., & Grogan, S. (2011). Women's reasons for seeking breast reduction. A qualitative investigation. *Journal of Health Psychology*, 16(1), 31–41.
- Rodriguez, E. (2011). Reflections from an international immersion trip: new possibilities to institutionalize curriculum. *Teacher Education Quarterly*, 28(1), 147–160.
- Sahin, M. (2008). Cross-cultural experience in preservice teacher education. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 24, 1777–1790.
- Sim, C. (2005). Preparing for professional experiences—incorporating pre-service teachers as 'communities of practice'. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 22(1), 77–83.
- Smith, L., & Southerland, S. (2007). Reforming practice or modifying reforms? Elementary teachers' response to the tools of reform. *Journal of Research in Science Teaching*, 44(3), 396–423.
- Spolsky, B. (1989). *Conditions for second language learning*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Sutherland, I., Howard, S., & Markauskaite, L. (2010). Professional identity creation: examining the development of beginning preservice teachers' understanding of their work as teachers. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 26(3), 455–465.
- Swain, M., & Lapkin, S. (1998). Interaction and second language learning: two adolescent French immersion students working together. *The Modern Language Journal*, 82(3), 320–337.
- Symaco, J. (2011). Higher education in the Philippines and Malaysia: the learning region in the age of knowledge-based societies. *Journal of International and Comparative Education*, 1(1), 40–51.
- Talbot, S. (2009). International travel and implication. *Journal of Curriculum Theorizing*, 25(3), 104–118.
- Teekens, H. (2000). Teaching and learning in the international classroom. In Paul Crowther, Michael Joris, Matthias Otten, Bengt Nilsson, Hanneke Teekens, & Bernd Wächter (Eds.), *Internationalisation at home: A position paper* (pp. 29–34). European Association for International Education.
- Tesch, R. (1990). *Qualitative research: Analysis types and software tools*. New York: Falmer Press.
- Thomas, P. (2006). Preservice practicum teaching in Central Asia: a positive experience for both worlds. *Journal of Social Studies Research*, 3(1), 21–25.
- Trilokekar, R., & Kukar, P. (2011). Disorienting experiences during study abroad: reflections of pre-service teacher candidates. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 27, 1141–1150.
- Volet, S. (2003). Challenges of internationalisation: enhancing intercultural competence and skills for critical reflection on the situated and non-neutral nature of knowledge. *Language and Academic Skills in Higher Education*, 6, 1–10.
- Ward, M. J., & Ward, C. J. (2003). Promoting cross-cultural competence in preservice teachers through second language use. *Education*, 123(3), 532–536.
- Wenger, E. (1998). *Communities of Practice: Learning, meaning, and identity*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Wenger, E., McDermott, R., & Snyder, W. M. (2002). *Cultivating communities of practice*. Boston: Harvard Business School Press.
- Wertsch, J. V. (1991). *Voices of the mind: A sociocultural approach to mediated action*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Willard-Holt, C. (2001). The impact of a short-term international experience for preservice teachers. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 17, 505–517.
- Wilson, A. (2001). Growing towards teaching from a global perspective: an analysis of secondary social studies pre-service teachers. *The International Social Studies Forum*, 1(2), 127–144.
- Wright, T., & Bolitho, R. (1993). Language awareness: a missing link in language teacher education? *ELT Journal*, 47(4), 292–304.
- Zhang, Z., & Kenny, R. (2010). Learning in an online distance education course: experiences of three international students. *The International Review of Research in Open and Distance Learning*, 11(1). Retrieved [17 May, 2012] <http://www.irrodl.org/index.php/irrodl/article/view/775/1481>.