



The Journal of Language Teaching and Learning™

2017

Volume 7/Issue 2

Article 3

Designing Culturally Appropriate Online Professional Development for English Language Teachers through the Incorporation of the Action Research Paradigm

Paul Graham Keble, Faculty of Education, University of Tasmania, Launceston, Australia, paul.kebble@utas.edu.au

Recommended Citations:

APA

Keble, P. G. (2017). Designing culturally appropriate online professional development for English language teachers through the incorporation of the action research paradigm. *The Journal of Language Teaching and Learning*, 7(2), 36-50.

MLA

Paul Graham Keble. "Designing culturally appropriate online professional development for English language teachers through the incorporation of the action research paradigm." *The Journal of Language Teaching and Learning* 7.2 (2017): 36-50.

The JLTL is freely available online at www.jltl.org, with neither subscription nor membership required.

Contributors are invited to review the Submission page and manuscript templates at www.jltl.org/Submitonline

As an online journal, the JLTL adopts a green-policy journal. Please print out and copy responsibly.





The Journal of Language Teaching and Learning, 2017(2), pp.36-50

Designing Culturally Appropriate Online Professional Development for English Language Teachers through the Incorporation of the Action Research Paradigm

Paul Graham Kebble¹

ARTICLE INFO

Article History:

Received October 9, 2016

Revisions completed April 10, 2017

Published June 28, 2017

Key Words:

English language teaching

Action research

Cultural suitability

Thematic analysis

Professional development

ABSTRACT

A qualitative heuristic, single case study was conducted into the cultural suitability of an extended international online professional development (PD) course for English language teachers. To promote cultural suitability, course participants were required to utilise action research within their specific professional context and to consider, through reflection and discussion, the appropriateness of pedagogic methodologies, approaches and materials presented within the course. The research therefore aimed to determine whether an online environment can be designed to promote culturally empathetic professional engagements delivering relevant learnings, and whether the action research paradigm can foster culturally suitable professional development. Course participants were practicing English language teachers in various professional settings, predominantly in the Pacific region, and identifying as being monolingual English speakers, multilingual with English as one first language or having English as a second or other language. The research's qualitative methodology employed a thematic analysis of the multiple sources of collected data, including a narrative written by the course provider, with the discussion and conclusions emanating from the triangulation of the generated themes and relevant contemporary literature. The research concluded that online PD can be designed to provide a culturally empathetic learning environment, and by adopting the action research paradigm, the mode of course delivery was deemed to be successful in providing culturally suitable professional development.

© Association of Applied Linguistics. All rights reserved

The researcher is a Teaching English to Students of Other Languages (TESOL) professional and academic with over thirty-five years of teaching and teacher training experience at primary, secondary and tertiary levels. The researcher has enjoyed an incredible career including the opportunity to have lived and worked in seven countries: United Kingdom, Barbados, Portugal, Brunei Darussalam, Australia, United Arab Emirates and Malaysia (twice). Through these international professional experiences, the researcher has witnessed a great variation in English language teachers' professional development (PD). And as he

¹ Faculty of Education, University of Tasmania, Launceston, Australia, paul.kebble@utas.edu.au

gained experience in teaching, he increasingly became involved in providing teacher PD, both linguistic and pedagogic. Over the 10 years prior to embarking on this research, the researcher was involved in three specific PD modes: a) the production and presentation of intensive face-to-face (4 weeks) PD courses for overseas (Thai and Chinese) English Language (EL) teachers at a higher education institution in Australia; b) as a local tutor for practising teachers on the Cambridge University (ESOL) Diploma in English Language Teaching to Adults (DELTA) course, in Australia and Malaysia; and c) assisting in providing the 'ESL in the Mainstream' course produced by the Council of Education Associations of South Australia, in international schools in Malaysia.

Professional development is crucial for English language teachers in providing access to contemporary knowledge and encouraging professional growth (Richards & Renandya, 2002) and for the long-term development of quality learning and teaching practices (Richards & Farrell, 2005). The researcher's PD involvements directly determined the focus of this research, and particularly the initial two. Ten years prior this period, the researcher had followed the DELTA course whilst teaching English at Sekolah Rendah Pintu Malim, a state primary school in Brunei Darussalam. The course was very well presented and relevant to the broader TESOL world, but not necessarily to my existing pedagogical and cultural setting. Ten years later, as a local tutor for the DELTA, the researcher again questioned its specific relevance for an individual's cultural and pedagogic setting, particularly when teaching within an international curriculum, and was a little uncomfortable with the prescriptive nature of the required learning and assessment.

The 4 week PD courses for overseas teachers were provided for teachers, teacher trainers and education professional managers travelling from either Thailand or China. Sending teachers, heads of department or teacher trainers on short term teacher development and learning courses can be both expensive and logistically complicated. These participants were government funded and discussed feeling privileged to be able to attend. However, these courses were inherently expensive, an important factor that would heavily restrict the number of participants. Accordingly, attendees were, on their return home, expected to network and disseminate teaching ideas and concepts gleaned from our courses. The material presented on the courses was what we, as course designers, had determined was appropriate and was closely aligned to current methodology in EL teaching, particularly informed through our experiences of providing the Cambridge Certificate in English Language Teaching to Adults (CELTA) and DELTA TESOL training, and from our culturally and pedagogically biased standpoint. We considered the course material to be applicable to the generic needs of EL teachers worldwide. The feedback from course participants (CP), through both formal post-course questionnaires and informal discussions, was always very positive, perhaps as an expression of respectful cultural norm, and participants considered the courses to be very informative and enjoyable. However, CPs often discussed that probably less than half of the course content provided was useable in their cultural and pedagogical environment. Many comments reiterated findings discussed by Canagarajah (2003) and included the restrictiveness of their curriculum, the pressure of an examination-driven curriculum, the culturally acceptable behaviour of a teacher, the linguistic cultural bias of the course material and what was perceived as customary pedagogical practice in the classroom were all reasons cited. We, as course designers, had not taken into account the pedagogical culture of our CPs, which subsequently suggested to me that we were perhaps operating from a 'colonial' stance of pedagogical and cultural superiority. The notion among us that these overseas teachers would have to change their pedagogic practices to become effective EL teachers was rather too prevalent.

It was a personally informed consideration, then, that international English language educators attending PD courses provided in monolingual English settings, were too often being provided without appropriate consideration of cultural and pedagogical needs, however contemporary the learning methodologies being introduced may be. With limited understanding of the specific socio-cultural needs

of the educational environment entered, or the specific requirements of the curriculum, the design of such PD was, at best, interesting for participants, at worst, inappropriate. And offering internationally recognised prescriptive PD as a specific qualification that did not allow for cultural suitability or empathy was again invariably inappropriate.

Concurrently, the researcher considered an electronic PD course supervised and supported via the internet had the potential to alleviate many of the intrinsic problems associated with attending such face-to-face PD courses, including financial, and could be designed to be culturally appropriate. And an online PD course incorporating the action research (AR) paradigm had the potential to be pedagogically and culturally empathetic in meeting the specific contextual needs of the PD participants. This researcher, therefore, wished to investigate whether an appropriately designed and delivered online PD course could hope to achieve these considered benefits, and through the process of providing teacher participants such a course, gain reflective insights into how this might be effectively realised. The researcher also wished to understand more comprehensively how acceptable and effective the action research paradigm would be to teachers in enhancing the PD process. The use of AR, the researcher posited, would enable language learning and teaching theory to be put into reflective practice, allowing teachers to make decisions and refinements in relation to their pedagogical setting, with the output of this research informing the design and delivery of online PD.

2. Defining Cultural Appropriateness, Suitability and Empathy for this Research

Within this research, 'culture' is defined in a social sciences and humanities sense and refers to groups of people with a shared way of life through behaviours, beliefs, values, and symbols (Hofstede, 1997).



Figure 1. Model depicting elements of culturally appropriate professional development

Cultural appropriateness, according to this research, is generated by cultural suitability of materials and resources presented within the course and the methods of engagement with these resources, and cultural empathetic communications achieved through the development of a community of learning and learners within the inherent systems of online communication. Cultural suitability, then, refers to the capacity of this PD course to provide multiple insights into teaching theory, methodology and materials emanating from a defined cultural setting and perspective, and with the recognition of such, offered for a participant's consideration and subsequent adaptability to their specific cultural and pedagogic needs. Cultural empathy describes the nature of the PD course's systems of engagement, with in-course communications designed to foster an informed community of learning and learners engaged in professional development. Within this community of learners, all participants, including the course provider, are encouraged to provide insights from their own perspectives, discuss other's contributions,

and present their engagements with the action research process, whether one to one (emails and chat line) or for the wider PD community (blogs and discussion boards).

This qualitative research project, then, was designed to investigate the cultural appropriateness of an online professional development (PD) course for English language teachers that the researcher had constructed. Within the online course, English language teaching methodologies and materials were presented with acknowledgement to their cultural background and as not being prescriptive or culturally authoritarian. The AR paradigm was to be utilised as it is a form of self-reflective enquiry undertaken by participants in educational settings in order to improve their own social and educational practices. Action research can enhance teachers' understandings of learning and teaching practices and the situations in which the practices are carried out, and as such is research oriented toward the enhancement of direct practice (Hinkel, 2011; Kebble, 2010; Kemmis, 2006; Kemmis & McTaggart, 1988). Action research, therefore, was introduced within the research project to allow participants to experiment with presented approaches and techniques in English language learning and teaching, and reflect on what pedagogic practices might be appropriately applied within their specific learning environments. And a community of learning and development was encouraged through the multiple systems of online communication offered within the PD online learning platform.

3. Methodology

3.1. The Research Questions

Within the overall research theme of whether culturally appropriate online professional development for English language teachers can be provided online and through incorporating the action research paradigm, two specific questions needed to be analysed:

- 1) Can a culturally empathetic professional development learning environment for international English language teachers be provided online?
- 2) Can a culturally suitable professional development course for English language teachers be provided through the utilisation of the action research paradigm?

3.2. Designing the TESOL PD Course

The design of this PD course was based on the premise of social and professional equity and that all agents involved with the course form a community of learning and learners. In designing the PD course, the researcher was mindful of McFadzean and McKenzie's (2001) advice that to create an effective and supportive e-learning environment, participants must be encouraged to take ownership of the learning experience provided by an on-line PD course. McFadzean and McKenzie (2001) also suggest that ownership can be enhanced through discussion, collaboration and decision making to create an ethos of course congruency and reciprocal support. The researcher endeavoured to create an online professional developmental environment that facilitated transfer of contemporary English language learning and teaching approaches, techniques and materials; to provide participants with the tools to enable informed decisions to be made as to what was applicable and appropriate within their specific learning environments; and to facilitate participant interactions, within a community of professional learners, via the various communication tools found within the website.

The course would include: 1) an introduction to a teaching methodology or approach, and the underpinning theories of learning, teaching and language acquisition, 2) relevant international peer-

reviewed journal articles discussing the practical application of each methodology or approach, 3) a personally designed lesson plans showcasing the methodology, from the researcher's perspective, 4) video of these lessons being taught by English language teachers in a variety of settings, and 5) module quizzes designed as a consolidation exercise, and not assessment. Utilising the discussion board feature within the online learning environment (MOODLE), participants would be encouraged to discuss the presented materials with reference to their teaching situation with the course provider and with other participants. Individual participants were also encouraged to use the blogging feature as an ongoing self-reflection journal, which could be accessed by the course provider, and other participants, if so wished. Within this blog, participants were able to design, implement and reflect upon their own practice by employing the action research paradigm to assess the effectiveness of the introduced learning and teaching methodology in their specific context. Evaluation of an individual's performance on the course was achieved through self-reflection and discussions with the course provider.

3.2.1. Course Content

The following five module titles represent the course outline. The rationale for these areas of English language teaching and learning were based upon current literature and from extensive personal professional experience (Brown, 2007; Harmer, 2007; Hedge, 2000; Larsen-Freeman, 2000; Nunan, 2003; Richards & Renandya, 2002). The PD course was designed with the concept that each module would be engaged with over a period of a month, therefore this PD would require a five month commitment.

- Module One: Language Corpora and the Lexical Approach.
- Module Two: Grammar-Based Syllabi, a Deductive, Inductive or Combined Approach.
- Module Three: Task-Based and Project-Based learning.
- Module Four: Multiple Intelligences and Language Learning Strategies.
- Module Five: Content-Based Instruction and a Cross-Curricula Approach.

3.2.2. Communicating within the Course

In designing communication strategies, the researcher was cognisant that the course design should alleviate a feeling of participant isolation by creating a community of learners, by facilitating social and professional interaction between participants, and by encouraging a culture of collaboration (Hutchens, Jones, Crone-Todd & Eyre, 2006). To promote an ethos of a community of learning and learners, and culturally empathetic engagement through shared understandings, the following communication strategies were implemented within the course's online learning environment: (a) module related discussion boards where participants would be encouraged to post questions, discuss the presented literature with personal or cultural interpretations, and consider levels of success of specific learning and teaching strategies gleaned through experimentation; (b) chat rooms, both textual and voice, where the above can be discussed synchronously, as well as a forum for less formal communication; (c) sharing of email addresses for private participant communication, and (e) a blog for each participant to form a reflective dialogue relating to the empirical elements of the course requirements.

3.2.3. Action Research and the PD Course

The AR paradigm was employed within the course to encourage the provision of pedagogically and culturally empathetic professional learning and development. Parsons and Brown (2002) have

described AR in teaching as a methodology that provides teachers with a tool for attaining valid and useful data which can be used to develop effective pedagogical practices. Burnaford, Fischer, and Hobson (2001) have stated that “investigations conceived, implemented, and evaluated by actual teachers in real classrooms among live school-children promise to better stand the tests of practicality and personal relevance” (p. 7). Requiring CPs to interact through AR with the pedagogical methodological information provided within the course allowed for informed decisions to be constructed on what was, and what was not, applicable for the participant’s unique pedagogic and cultural situation.

Within this research project, AR would be assessed for its capacity to provide for personal and cultural professional relevance by requiring CPs to engage in classroom research. Kemmis and McTaggart (2005) referred to the process as “classroom action research” and have pointed out that “classroom action research typically involves the use of qualitative interpretive modes of inquiry and data collection by teachers with a view to teachers making judgements about how to improve their own practices.” (in Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p. 561). McTaggart (1996) has also discussed the adaption of AR within differing cultural settings and suggests that the AR paradigm does not need a specific definition, rather, the concept should be presented and the participant allowed to “reshape”, to personal requirements to allow the reconstitution of AR in ways that make sense within the participants’ culture while retaining the philosophical features familiar to the course presenter.

A variety of concepts describing the implementation of AR are available in the literature (Beaumont & O’Brien, 2000; Carr & Kemmis, 2009; Chang & Beaumont, 2000; Cherry & Bowden, 1999; Kember, 2001; Kemmis & McTaggart, 1988; Nunan, 2009; Parsons & Brown, 2002; Woods, et al, 2000). The concept presented by Kemmis and McTaggart (1988), based upon an ongoing cyclical approach to AR through a repeated sequence of ‘plan, action, observe, reflect’, initially appeared to be the most appropriate model to utilise for the PD course. However, although AR within the course is based on Kemmis and McTaggart’s model, the researcher felt the need for a revised approach that would respect the time constraints of practicing teachers involved in PD and the functional requirements involved for utilising a blog. Specifically for this course, a practical and more time efficient five stage model for AR was developed (Kebble, 2010).

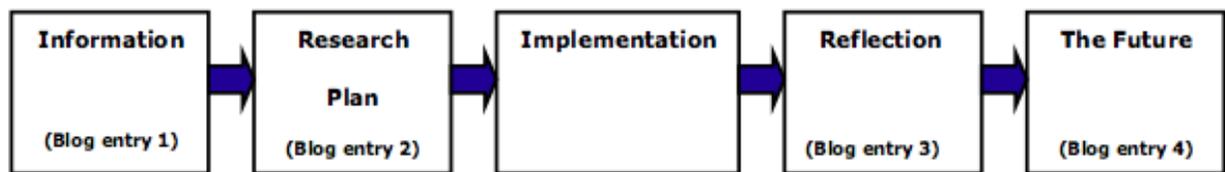


Figure 2. Action research for online professional development (Kebble, 2010)

3.2.4. Research Methodology

The research was based upon the post-modern tenet that there is not one specific truth that diversity is respected and honoured and “by accepting the diversity and plurality of the world, no one element is privileged or more powerful than another.” (Merriam, 2002, p. 375). Whatever is described within the study, including conclusions, are based on this researcher’s own interpretations, which emanate from a personal cultural, experiential and socio-political standpoint. The nature of the way this research has been conducted is aligned to the description provided by Grbich (2004) who said “any borders (disciplinary, research approaches, country and culture) are constructions that can be crossed,

incorporated or reconstructed” and that the “search for reality ‘out there’ is qualified by a recognition that the tools, language and process of discovery, are socially and culturally constructed” (p. 18).

3.2.5. A Single, Heuristic Case Study

A single, heuristic case study approach to the research was adopted as the research topic, and in this case, the culturally empathetic implementation of the PD course, was clearly defined. Cohen, Manion & Morrison (2007) have discussed that “case studies are set in temporal, geographical, organizational, institutional, and other contexts that enable boundaries to be drawn around the case” (p. 253). Merriam (1998) has explained that the term heuristic denotes “that case studies illuminate the reader’s understanding of the phenomenon under study” and “can clarify why an innovation worked or failed to work” (p. 31). Yin has expanded on this notion by explaining that a single case study is appropriate for the analysis of a “unique” (p. 47) case and that conclusions emanating from a single case study can inform the global nature of that unique program. Although this research was limited, the researcher believed that its output could be considered globally. Nunan and Bailey have explained that “a case study is often characterised as being an in-depth analysis of one particular exemplar of the thing we wish to understand” (2009. p. 8) and go on to point out that “case studies involve the researcher’s long-term, or longitudinal, involvement in the research context, as well as detailed data collection about the person or entity being investigated” (pp. 8-9). The empirical section of this research was conducted over a period of 1 year and focused on the multiple interactions between the PD course, the course participants, and the course presenter, the richness of this data being qualitatively analysed for the resulting discussion.

3.2.6. PD Course Participants

Altogether there were 14 course participants who were practicing English language teachers in various international professional settings. These included a state secondary school in Port Vila, Vanuatu where English was a second language; an English medium international school in Suva, Fiji, where international students were engaged in English language learning for future curriculum engagement; and an English language learning college in Tokyo, Japan. Two teachers identified themselves as having English as one of multiple first languages, eleven with English as a second or other language, and one teacher being a monolingual English speaker. In the schools in Fiji and Vanuatu, the school principals were keen for their teachers to engage with the PD on offer, and strongly encouraged teachers to become involved. It was also of relevance to this research that encouragement was maintained throughout the five month period of engagement.

3.2.7. Constructing the Course Presenter’s Narrative

Duff (2008) discusses that increasingly researchers are providing accounts of “the involvement of the researcher in the study, the perspectives and biases (or subjectivities) of the researcher, and the reflections of the researcher on the research experience” (p. 195). The rationale for a personal narrative derives from a perceived need to elucidate upon the researcher’s multiple roles and functions within the research process. These roles were:

- the PD course producer
- the recruiter of participants
- the PD course participants’ mentor

- the interlocutor for data collection

For this personal narrative, not only was a description of the empirical journey taken provided, but also the cultural and professional background of the researcher. This description would allow the determination of the researcher's positioning and credentials for the research and its outcomes. Bruner (1990) discusses the presentation of self through autobiography, or narratives, and suggests that the notion of self through a retrospective narrative is an interpretive construct that achieves a reality that is shaped "by a society, an economy, and a language, all of which have historic 'realities' which, although open to revision, have created a scaffold that supports our practices as human agents" (p. 117). This narrative would provide the cultural, socio-economic, professional and ontological background of the researcher; the many facets of the empirical journey influencing the research; and the interactions with the course participants and within the course participants' professional environments, from the researcher's perspective.

3.3. Data Collection and Instruments

Cohen et al. (2007) have suggested that there is "no single prescription for which data collection instruments to use; rather the issue here is of the 'fitness for purpose' (p. 181)", while Lankshear and Knobel (2004) have stated that "what counts as data depends heavily on the questions or hypothesis driving a study" (p. 172), as determined by the researcher. As this PD course would be running over an extended period of time, and as the researcher would be actively involved in the support of the participants, a range of data collecting systems were designed. The data collected were: 1) PD course related email communications, 2) intra-website communications from the messaging system provided within the PD website, 3) intra-website communications from the chat-line provided within the PD website, 4) Individual participant blogs, 5) module focussed discussion boards, 6) post-course questionnaire for completion by the course participants, and 7) post-course interviews between selected course participants, and 8) my narrative.

3.4. Data Analysis

Once all data had been collected, Bruan and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis was utilised, being "a method for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes) within data" (p. 79). Boyatzis (1998) describes a theme as "a pattern found in the information that at minimum describes and organises the possible observations and at maximum interprets aspects of the phenomenon." (p. 4). Thematic analysis was also chosen to provide a more "detailed and nuanced account" (Bruan & Clarke, p. 79) of the themes that related directly to the specific research questions.

During data analysis the researcher considered the analysis "involves the searching *across* a data set – be that a number of interviews or focus groups, or a range of texts – to find repeated patterns of meaning" and that the "analysis is not a *linear* process of simply moving from one phase to the next. Instead, it is more recursive, where movement is back and forth, as needed, throughout the phases." (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 86). This process required extensive recursive analysis of the text, through which the themes for the participant's narrative emerged.

3.4.1. Searching for Themes

Initially, a list of 17 codes was created, requiring the instigation of a sorting process to categorise these different codes into potential themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Data within the candidate themes were

effectively defining the themes, and the data within these candidate themes provided an appropriate “coherent and internally consistent account” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 92) when related to this specific research question. From the 17 codes, the final set of four themes that would inform this research emerged:

- PD course participant involvement and motivation.
- Course participant online interaction and support.
- Action Research within the PD course.
- Cultural and pedagogical suitability of the PD

The researcher considered the first two themes’ focus was largely on the empathetic nature of the design of the course and its interactional structure, whilst the final two discussed the cultural suitability of the material and of the interactional and learning style of the PD. Interestingly, the topic of motivation was raised quite extensively, an area the researcher had not considered extensively when designing the research, but one that is of obvious importance when considering an extended period of engagement with PD.

4. Discussion

4.1. Providing a Culturally Empathetic PD Environment

4.1.1. PD Course Participant Involvement and Motivation

Mindful and respectful of an attitude towards English language competency amongst international EL educators, the researcher was interested to learn that the majority of course participants considered and described themselves as being an English as a second language speakers, with no negative connotations. This ESL positioning provided the relevant course participants with a connection of understanding between themselves and the authors of the journal articles presented within the course, particularly those with an ESL background, and commented that the articles created a feeling of academic and professional empathy. The course participants’ comments on material implementation were invariable positive, suggesting that the materials that had been designed and implemented were appropriate for multi-cultural classrooms.

The motivation to follow, and complete, an extended PD course is affected by both intrinsic and extrinsic influences (Harmer, 2007). Both effects were apparent in CPs’ involvement with the course. The course was designed to be cross-culturally inclusive and mutually culturally and professionally empathetic, which Wlodkowski (2003) has indicated is a fundamental requirement to foster intrinsic motivation. The motivation for completing the course became extrinsic as external encouragement and expectations by school managers and principals become a driving motivational force. Schieb and Karabenick (2011) discuss the importance of a positive educational environment for motivating PD involvement and the importance of a strong and positive relationship between teacher and school administration. Intrinsic motivation was evident as CPs continued to respect the personal pedagogical benefits of completing the course as well as the described enjoyment of following the course and being able to communicate with others within the provided online community of learners and learning. CPs also demonstrated intrinsic motivation through a deep interest and involvement with the course material and the experimentation within methodologies, which was evident in online communications, in the enthusiastic involvement with online activity, and in the presentation and descriptions of the action research process within CP’s blogs.

4.1.2. Course Participant's Online Interaction and Support

The PD course utilised the Moodle LMS platform for the provision of course material and for intra-course synchronous and asynchronous communications. This research's findings support the conclusions arrived at by much research (Appana, 2008; Harlen & Doubler, 2004; Moore, 2013, Sun, 2014) that online delivery of learning allows participants: a) time for reflection, b) flexibility in course engagement, c) capability to provide feedback and to read feedback from others (discussion boards), and d) electronic space to publish text, in multiple forms, enhancing the involvement with the PD and with peers within the online learning environment. The data shows that participants accessed course materials multiple times, suggesting they were able to engage with and reflect on the presented topics and materials. Over the time, the researcher, as course presenter, was able to adapt, alter or add to the materials or the style of presentation in relation to feedback or comments. For example, the online quiz was designed to be used as a consolidator of provided information and not as a test. Initially participants were allowed two test takes, but CP results from the first test were low and CPs commented that the test did not allow for extended consideration about the questions. As a resolution, a Word document was provided with all questions presented, and reduced the number of takes to one, with feedback for this strategy being positive and results showing a distinct increase in scores. Such feedback was encouraged constantly throughout the course's duration and was provided via emails or on the chat line, allowing for discussions around all facets of the course and course material. CPs commented that a system allowing their direct involvement in affecting the PD environment, and the ability to negotiate more appropriate systems contributed to the sense of belonging to a community of learners, and hence, an empathetic collegial professional learning environment.

In terms of support, the researcher communicated with the course participants when: 1) directly asked for help, 2) there was online evidence of issues around course interaction or uncertainty, and 3) no apparent course interaction had occurred for a period of time exceeding 4 weeks. Respectful and affable language was always used in online communications regarding course participation, which CPs eluded to positively. However, some CPs stated that the course provider had not engage in enough regularised online interaction and suggested that weekly communications would have been more appropriate. One participant suggested that if the researcher had communicated with her on a weekly basis, she would have been more motivated to engage with the course. The researcher was concerned with the perceived position within the PD and did not want to appear too controlling, responding more than initiating communications. However, through this feedback the researcher considers that providing a weekly email sent to all participants would be appropriate, and have now adopted this strategy in all online learning and teaching.

4.2. Providing Culturally Suitable PD

4.2.1. Action Research (AR) and the PD Course

AR was employed as the paradigm through which participants could interact and experiment with course material, and extract what was deemed culturally and pedagogically suitable. The course participants stated that the AR process had helped to gauge the effectiveness of lesson materials and plans, and the results of the reflective self-assessment enabled participants to refine lesson materials and plans for future use. The course participants commented positively on the use of AR in teaching and professional development and suggested that they would continue to utilise the AR paradigm within their professional practices. The course participants' discussions through blogging, and subsequent

interviews, suggest that the AR process allowed course participants to design and implement culturally suitable materials within the pedagogic methodologies provided. One participant, Rema, had utilised the AR model within the PD course for each of the five modules presented within the course. The researcher observed that Rema had obviously understood and embraced the AR system employed within the course, indicated by the contribution of relevant and appropriate texts within her blog. In the subsequent interview, Rema commented positively on the use of AR in teaching and stated that in one form or other she would continue to utilise action research and reflective practices to inform her pedagogy. After the delivery of a prepared lesson, Rema would: assess effectiveness through testing, when appropriate; analyse student's written texts; encouraging students to provide immediate feedback, either through discussion or raising of hands in response to questioning; make personal reflective notes during and after lesson delivery. Rema would use this information to inform the refinement of the lesson in preparation for the next delivery. Rema's comments, and an analysis of the blogging of the AR process for each module demonstrated that Rema was able to design culturally appropriate and acceptable learning materials within each of the introduced methodologies and techniques. Rema's comments on material implementation were invariable positive, suggesting that the materials that she had designed and implemented were appropriate for her multi-cultural classroom. Discussions within the AR process allowed for reflection on the cultural acceptability of material and adaptations to the material, and hence methodology, for cultural acceptance. Discussions gleaned through participant blogging, and subsequent conducted interviews, suggest that the AR process allows course participants to design, refine and implement culturally empathetic materials within a range of introduced pedagogic methodologies.

4.2.2. Cultural and Pedagogical Suitability of the PD

The researcher, as the producer and presenter of the PD course, endeavoured not to position the content and delivery as prescriptive or culturally authoritarian, but as a cross-cultural sharing of professional experience and knowledge. Within the course the researcher acknowledged that any material provided or produced would inherently carry cultural bias. To promote cultural and pedagogical suitability, the course participants were encouraged to use whatever was provided within the course in any way they deemed appropriate, or not. Aligned with this, academic texts written from a variety of cultural backgrounds to further enhance the cross-cultural tenet of the provision of course material were provided. The intention of creating a culturally suitable course was, according to the course participants, partially achieved through the inclusion of these peer-reviewed articles from practising English language teachers from various linguistic backgrounds.

The course participants recognised the course had been devised to allow for cross-cultural usage and commented positively that they found the course not to be culturally or pedagogically authoritarian, or prescriptive, and did not purport to describe how English should be taught. The course participants believed that the course was not culturally patronising, was respectful of the teacher, her pedagogy and her culture. Through analysis of all texts, course participants considered the PD course did not expect them to change how they taught, did not require them to adopt all the teaching strategies introduced within the course, made allowance for cultural diversity, discussed cultural pedagogy, and allowed them to adapt the presented material to her teaching situation. These beliefs suggest that the course was recognised by the course participants as functioning successfully and respectfully within their

environment and that the course producer/presenter, had not positioned himself, or the course material, from an authoritarian stance.

5. Conclusions, Implications, and Suggestions

The researcher acknowledges the implications this particular research has generated, which are discussed below, requires further investigation to justify the suppositions presented, and the discussion is offered through the limitations of this research. Reflecting on the first research question, 'Can a culturally empathetic professional development learning environment for international English language teachers be provided online?' The producer and provider of the PD course endeavoured not to position the content and delivery as prescriptive or culturally authoritarian, but as a cross-cultural sharing of professional experience and knowledge. Within the course, acknowledgement was provided by the researcher that any course material would carry cultural baggage. This acknowledgement was intended to inspire cultural/pedagogical material manipulation, that is, the course participant was encouraged to use whatever teaching materials were provided within the course, however they thought fit. Along with this acknowledgement, academic texts and external links were offered provided from a variety of cultural backgrounds to further enhance the cross-cultural tenet of the provision of course material. Participants recognised that the course had been devised to allow for cross-cultural engagement and usage and commented positively that the course was not culturally or pedagogically authoritarian, or prescriptive, and did not purport to describe how English should be taught. This conclusion implies that professional development for English language learning and teaching should embrace the notion of learning English as an International language, within multiple learner settings and for multiple uses and as such any PD requires: a) input from multiple international sources, b) open declaration of the cultural backgrounds of course providers, c) the creation of an online community of learning where participants are encouraged to discuss material engagement from their learning and learner perspectives, d) encouragement to provide a critically reflective overview of course details and materials, and e) an online learning environment which is easily navigable, and the provision of clear instructions on how to use the site effectively.

In addressing the second research question 'Can a culturally suitable professional development course for English language teachers be provided through the utilisation of the action research paradigm?' course participants responded positively that AR provided a reflective tool enabling professional assessment and refinement of teaching materials, and with which learning and teaching could be enhanced. The researcher was able to conclude that this positive assessment of the utilisation of AR within this PD suggests teaching methodologies and materials introduced within the PD course are able to be suitably developed for specific cultural requirements of the PD participants and for their specific learners. This conclusion implies that utilising AR, CPs are able to experiment with, reflect on, report upon and draw conclusions from the introduced methodologies in relation to their specific cultural and pedagogical settings. The research suggests that to include and embrace the action research paradigm within professional development it is important for participants to initially understand the function of AR in their PD. This can be achieved by providing both an introduction to the concept and an exemplar of how it might appear within the online environment. The research indicated that through online engagement with peers' AR description, participants gained a deeper understanding of AR's function and functionality within their PD engagement, and were able to apply this deeper understanding to their own engagements with AR.

To conclude, the research has shown this online professional development course for International English language teachers as being described as both culturally and pedagogically empathetic and inclusive by those undertaking the professional learning journey. This testimony has been described as being achieved through: a) the course presenter and the course material originating from a culturally acknowledged milieu; b) the inclusion of course materials from a variety of cultural sources, c) the promotion of intra-course, cross-cultural integration; d) through a clearly defined and accessible online environment, and e) by implementing action research as the course material interactional paradigm.

References

- Appana, S. (2008). A review of benefits and limitations of online learning in the context of the student, the instructor and the tenured faculty. *International Journal on E-Learning*, 7(1), 5-22.
- Beaumont, M., & O'Brien, T. (Eds.). (2000). *Collaborative Research in Second Language Education*. Sterling, VA: Trentham Books.
- Boyatzis, R. (1998). *Transforming qualitative information: thematic analysis and code development*. Cleveland: Sage Publications.
- Braun, V. & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3, 77-101. doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa
- Brown, H. D. (2007). *Principles of language learning and teaching* (5th ed.). White Plains, NY: Pearson Education Inc.
- Bruner, J. (1990). *Acts of Meaning*. Harvard University Press, Cambridge.
- Burnaford, G., Fischer, J. & Hobson, D. (2001). *Teachers doing research, the power of action through enquiry*. London: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Carr, W., & Kemmis, S. (2009). Educational action research: A critical approach. In S. Noffke & B. Somekh (Eds.), *Handbook of educational action research* (pp. 74-84). London: SAGE. doi.org/10.4135/9780857021021.n8
- Canagarajah, A. S. (2003). *Resisting linguistic imperialism in English teaching*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Chang, K-S., & Beaumont, M. (2000). Writing to Learn: a bottom-up approach to in-service teacher development. In M. Beaumont & T. O'Brien (Eds.). (2000). *Collaborative Research in Second Language Education* (pp. 83-94). Great Britain. Trentham Books.
- Cherry, N., & Bowden, J. A. (1999). *Action Research: A pathway to action, knowledge and learning*. Melbourne: RMIT University Press.
- Cohen, L., Manion, L., & Morrison, K. (2007). *Research methods in education* (6th ed.). Oxford: Routledge.
- Denzin, N. & Lincoln, Y. Eds. (2005). *The SAGE Handbook of Qualitative Research* (3rd ed.). USA: Sage Publications.
- Duff, P. (2008). *Case Study Research in Applied Linguistics*. USA. Taylor & Francis Group.
- Grbich, C. (2004). *New Approaches in Social Research*. London. Sage Publications. doi.org/10.4135/9781849209519
- Harlen, W. & Doubler, S. (2004). Can teachers learn through enquiry online? Studying professional development in science delivered online and on-campus. *International Journal of Science Education* 26, 1247–1267. doi.org/10.1080/0950069042000177253
- Harmer, J. (2007). *The practice of English language teaching* (4th ed.). Essex, England: Pearson Longman ELT.
- Hedge, T. (2000). *Teaching and learning in the language classroom*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Hinkel, E. (2011). *Handbook of research in second language teaching and learning*, (Vol. 2). New York: Taylor & Francis.
- Hofstede, G. (1997). *Cultures and organizations: Software of the mind*. New York: McGraw Hill.
- Hollingsworth, H. (2005). *Learning about teaching and teaching about learning: Using video data for research and professional development*. Retrieved October 14, 2006 from www.acer.edu.au/workshops/documents/HilaryHollingsworth.pdf.
- Hutchens, S. J., Jones, J. R., Crone-Todd, D. E., & Eyre, H. L. (2006). Engaging and assessing students in online courses. *Academic Exchange Quarterly*, 10, 110-116.
- Kebble, P. (2010). Electronic professional development, action research and blogging: An ideal combination. *Asian EFL Journal*, 45, 25-43.
- Kember, D. (2001). Transforming teaching through action research. In D.A. Watkins. & J.B Biggs (Eds.), *Teaching the Chinese learner: Psychological and pedagogical perspectives* (pp.3-23). Melbourne: CERC & ACER Press.
- Kemmis, S. (2006). Participatory action research and the public sphere. *Educational Action Research Journal*, 14(4), 459–476. doi.org/10.1080/09650790600975593
- Kemmis, S., & McTaggart, R., (Eds.) (1988). *The action research planner* (3rd ed.). Victoria. Deakin University.
- Kemmis, S., & McTaggart, R. (2005). Participatory action research: Communicative action and the public sphere. In N. Denzin & Y. Lincoln (Eds.) *Handbook of Qualitative Research* (3rd ed.) (pp. 559-604). Thousand Oaks CA: Sage.
- Lankshear, C. & Knobel, M. (2004) *A Handbook for Teacher Research: From design to Implementation*. Berkshire, England: Open University Press.
- Larsen-Freeman, D. (2000). *Techniques and principles in language teaching* (2nd ed.). Oxford University Press.
- McFadzean, E., & McKenzie, J. (2001). Facilitating virtual learning groups: A practical approach. *Journal of Management Development*, 20(6) 470-494. doi.org/10.1108/02621710110399774

- McTaggart, R. (1996). An accidental researcher. In J. A. Mousley, M. Robson & D. Colquhoun (Eds.), *Horizons, images and experiences: The research story collection* (pp. 24-37). Geelong: Deakin University.
- Merriam, S. (1998). *Qualitative research and case study applications in education*. San Francisco: John Wiley & Sons. Inc.
- Merriam, S. (2002). *Qualitative research in practice; examples for discussion and analysis*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Moore, M.G. (2013). *Handbook of distance education*. New York: Taylor & Francis.
- Nunan, D. (Ed.) (2003). *Practical English language teaching*. New York: McGraw Hill Companies Inc.
- Nunan, D., & Bailey, K. (2009). *Exploring second language classroom research*. Canada: Heinle Cengage Learning.
- Parsons, D., & Brown, K. (2002). *Teacher as reflective practitioner and action researcher*. Australia: Wadsworth.
- Richards, J. C. & Renandya, W. A. (Eds.) (2002). *Methodology in language teaching: An anthology of current practice*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press. doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511667190
- Richards, J. C. & Farrell, S. C. (2005). *Professional development for language teachers: strategies for teacher learning*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press. doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511667237
- Schieb, L. J., & Karabenick, S. A. (2011). Teacher motivation and professional development: a guide to resources. Math and science partnership – motivation assessment program, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, MI.
- Sun, S. Y. H., (2014) Learner perspectives on fully online language learning. *Distance Education*, 35, 18-42. doi.org/10.1080/01587919.2014.891428
- Wlodkowski, R. (2003). Fostering motivation in professional development programs. *New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education*. 98, 39-47. doi.org/10.1002/ace.98
- Yin, R. K. (2009). *Case study research: Design and methods*. USA. Sage Publications.