An Assessment of Communities of Practice (CoPs) of Teacher Associations as a Tool for English Language Teacher Professional Development

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ABSTRACT

The article titled "An Assessment of communities of Practice (CoPs) of Teacher Associations as a tool for English language teacher Professional Development" seeks to highlight the role of CoPs of teacher Associations in the professional development of English Language teaching practitioners. Quantitative data was retrieved through a questionnaire from Cameroonian English language teachers, most of who belong to the Cameroon English Language and Literature Teacher's Association (CAMELTA), affiliate of TESOL International Association and the International Association of Teachers of English as a Foreign Language (IATEFL), the two Associations adopted as case studies for this Article. Findings showed that art of building teacher Communities of practice is not really practiced by these teachers. It was Aldo realized that CoPs could greatly boost teacher interest in the profession, where the teacher, through professional development could focus on his or her area of expertise and passion. This strategic grouping, (CoPs) may cause the teachers to socially identify themselves with like- minded colleagues. This could go a long way in boosting interdisciplinary discourse exchanges, -CoPs, which is very important for professional development.

Keywords: *Communities of practice; professional development; teacher Associations; assessment*

INTRODUCTION

After several interactions with other teachers during English Language Teacher conferences, learning through communities has been the secret of my professional growth. After benefitting from the Joint IATEFL- CAMELTA and joint TESOL- CAMELTA symposiums, the TESOL 2014 International convention, online TESOL and IATEFL professional development network communities, there was need to undertake research on teacher Communities of Practice (CoPs), teacher empowerment and professional development conferences. This article assesses the degree of the effective use of CoPs among ELT Practitioners for professional development. From personal experience, Cops within International conferences play a very important role in the professional development of English language teachers worldwide: They help in bringing out the specific and personal strength in the teacher. They enhance professional growth, which is purpose-focused. They enable the English Language teacher to group the students according to their specific language needs and linguistic competences. They promote interdisciplinarity among teachers and students in the sense that teachers find their niche and belong to specific communities, and during pedagogic or exchange programme. This article seeks to assess the effective use of cops by ELTs in Teachers associations for professional development purposes. Using CAMELTA, IATEFL, TESOL International and Africa TESOL as case studies to examine this phenomenon, this article assesses through a questionnaire ELT practitioner on the field. Their degree of awareness of this model which is used by IATEFL and TESOL International Association for the empowerment of their affiliate groups.

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DEFINITION AND REVIEW OF KEY TERMS

For a better understanding of the article, some key terms will be defined through a literature review.

COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE

Communities of Practice COPs have the functions of generating Knowledge and assisting in cultivating content in areas of expertise (professional development, social media trends, interdisciplinary trends, etc). Communities of Practice serve as area-specific resources, communicating and facilitating dialogue, developing leaders within the profession and within the association and disseminating relevant information to members. Communities of Practice engage with members around professional issues relevant to their areas of interest, facilitate dialogue and community Guiding Principles. These principles shape the relationship between the association and all COPs within the association.

Etienne and Beverly Wenger-Trayner, (2015) define Communities of Practice as follows: *«Communities of practice are formed by people who engage in a process of collective learning in a shared domain of human endeavour [...] a band of artists seeking new forms of expression, groups of engineers working on similar problems [...] a gathering of first-time managers helping each other to cope."*

In the development sector, communities of practice (CoPs) have become popular as tools for promoting learning and knowledge sharing. But there are many myths about CoPs, not least the idea that the technology will solve everything.

TESOL INTERNATIONAL ASSOCIATION AND IATEFL MODELS OF COPS

In this article TESOL International Association and International Association of Teachers of English as a Foreign Language (IATEFL) Communities of Practice (CoPs) are used as models of cops for ELT professional development. These models are used to assess the effective use of CoPs among affiliates of these international associations.

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Professional development is a combination of two words: 'professional' and 'development'. Oxford dictionary defines the word 'professional' as a word "connected with a job that needs special training or skill, especially one that needs a high level of education''. Oxford dictionary defines the word 'development' as "the gradual growth of something so that it becomes more advanced, stronger". In Macmillan dictionary, "professional development" is defined as "the process of obtaining the skills, qualifications, and experience that allow you to make progress in your career".

From a review on professional development issues of MINESEC (2022), the Ministry of Secondary Education Cameroon (MINESEC) for decades has been committed to professional development through in-service training programmes for teachers over the national territory. The Ministry, through the Minister's active physical and financial participation has always supported for instance, the Cameroon English and Literature Teachers' Association (CAMELTA), in their professional development efforts through divisional, regional, and national conferences.

According to Blanca-Irimia (2017), Professional Discourse (PD) has come under close scrutiny for the last two-to-three decades. The discipline termed 'professional discourse' developed side by side with the related fields of organizational discourse, workplace discourse, institutional discourse and more recently, corporate discourse, all related to or rather subservient to specific forms of communication. From the earliest studies and continuing today, communication-related studies have been interdisciplinary, drawing on sociology, psychology, anthropology, linguistics, and any discipline that could shed light on human behaviour in particular settings. It is the purpose of the present article to show the link between professional discourse and social practice and to link it to sociological theories.

Zial (2017) posits that the manner in which people have been talking and writing about 'development' and the rules according to which they have done so have evolved over time. Development discourse and Global History use the archeologically and genealogical methods of Michel Foucault to trace the origins of development discourse back to late colonialism and notes the significant discontinuities that led to the establishment of a new discourse and its accompanying industry. This book goes on to describe the contestations, appropriations and transformations of the concept. It shows how some of the trends in development discourse emphasize participation and ownership, sustainable development and free markets.

Ousseini (2018) indicates that teacher professional development may seek to improve practitioners' job performances, extend their experience for career development, promote job satisfaction, prepare them for change, and enhance their views of the job they do, or improve their understanding of educational policy (p.1). Perhaps the reason that teaching

professionals care about improving their development is so that students can increase in their learning. It is important to understand that development as a teaching professional is not a single event but rather a life-long process of learning and growing to improve the act of teaching.

Rui and Joana (2020), focus on the experience of a bilateral educational aid project concerning a Continuing Professional Development (CPD) programme for teachers with specific reference to Guinea Bissau. The authors were keen to understand how teachers and school principals perceived the impact of this CPD programme on the quality of teaching and learning. In this qualitative study, data from teachers and school principals were collected by means of interviews, focus groups and field notes.

Neil (2018) summarizes major findings on teacher professional development and recommends an integrated approach to teacher development. Five Ps for meeting the needs of teachers and schools are discussed. As professional development is approached with purpose, personalization, priority, passion and professional learning communities, teachers and the institutions in which they work increase in the capacity to improve student learning. Within English Language Teaching (ELT), teacher professional development is a topic of interest of the profession to ensure that its members act according to the highest levels of agreed upon standards. When asked, most teachers express a desire to improve their teaching in order to improve student learning. In addition, institutions place a "high priority" on the professionalization of the teachers they employ.

Cummings, (2018), analyses development discourses of knowledge and the knowledge society in the sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Discourse analysis is a collective name for a number of scientific methodologies for analysing semiosis, namely how meaning is created and communicated through written, vocal or sign language. Employing a genealogical approach which locates discourses in the field of prior discourses, two prior discourses of the knowledge society are identified in the key document of the SDGs. The concept of "knowledge" and "knowledge society" are found to have a marginal position within the main policy document "Transforming our world", adopted by the United Nations in September 2015.

The way in which knowledge is perceived in the SDGs has however, not yet received concerted attention. To date, criticisms relating to knowledge are themselves rather fragmented. They focus on the model of knowledge transfer, the lack of reference to local knowledge and the failure to recognize that development needs to be based on developing country experiences and realities. Ramalingam (2015), for example argues that "the overriding mentality (in the SDGs) is still that developing countries are vessels to be filled with knowledge and ideas.

Professional development enables students to have better learning outcomes. Educational technology, school district guidelines and curriculum standards are constantly changing, making it challenging for teachers to keep up with trends and best practices in the field. Professional development transforms teachers into better and more apt educators by enabling them to create relevant and tailored course instructions for today's students.

Philip Hubbard (2017) considers two areas of professional development for ESOL teachers: reviewing and refining existing skills and knowledge bases and expanding into new areas. The increasing integration of technology into language teaching and learning requires this process to take on new importance as technology permeates the daily lives of students and other areas of education as well as the settings in which learners will use English as it is acquired. The document also emphasizes the importance of technology skills for language teachers and makes a case for why continuing professional development in this area is so vital, requiring teachers to assimilate to a culture of constant change. It then offers a description of processes and resources currently available with the caveat that these too will change rapidly.

In Laura M. Desimone and Michael S. Garet (2015), best practices in teachers' Professional Development (PD) in the United States of America (U.S.A) are discussed. They begin by presenting a conceptual framework for effective professional development, which suggests five key features that make professional development effective- content, focus, active learning, coherence, sustained duration and collective participation. They then describe the findings from recent U.S.A research that has tested the five features, with an emphasis on the results of rigorous randomized control trials.

In Sapkota and Tharu (2016), globally, development is a value loaded concept. It refers to qualitative and quantitative changes through a successive transformation that directly or indirectly improves the livelihood of people. However, the meaning of development has been changed over a period of time in terms of its approaches, strategies and paradigms. In this context, the present paper presents a concept of 'contested development'. It is thus argued that development is contested discourse with a bunch of contradicting claims and counterclaims. It is articulation between

power and knowledge which is recycled in terms of the discourse. In the development literature mainly three forms of the discourses, i.e. Mainstream, Alternative and Post development, have been discussed.

There are a few different ways in which this type of discourse can be approached, even though it is often used to analyse and consider forms of meta-communication. The term "meta" is often used to refer to a process that evaluates or refers to itself in some way. This means that "meta-communication" is effectively, "communication about communication" or the language used to analyse how people discuss ideas and talk to each other. Development discourse specifically deals with the terminology involved in conversations regarding how regions or countries develop and handle progress toward greater success and productivity.

In Della Faille, Dimitri (2011), work conducted by discourse analysts working in International Development Studies (IDS) is critically examined. During the 1990s, a number of authors introduced the study of speech, text and image as new paths toward understanding the causes of development and underdevelopment expressed by national and international governmental agencies and non-governmental organisations, scientific disciplines and specialized knowledge fields (including IDS).

Chandra Mohanty and Escobar Arturo (2011) posit that:

there is no doubt that discourse analysts have successfully studied and criticized gender, culture, or class discrimination in speech, text and images at almost all levels of social cohabitation, harmonious or not. Yet, a reading of the scientific literature in discourse analysis seems to indicate that a crucial domain of social life has been left almost untouched.

Indeed, the study of discourses about underdevelopment appears to have been neglected by discourse analysts.

The assumption that some societies are underdeveloped is based on a variety of ethnocentric social, political and economic criteria. These societies are deemed to be at an inferior level of achievement, a situation that can be improved by applying few one-size-fits-all recipes that would be beneficial not only for the populations of the societies in question, but for global peace.

Chandra Mohanty and Escobar Arturo (2011) aim at mapping contemporary work carried out with perspectives that very closely resemble the way they (political or critical discourse analysts) investigate discourse and power. This article first of all hopes therefore, to modestly contribute to bridging work done by IDS scholars from a discourse analysis perspective and the larger discourse analysis community.

In Andersen (2000), defining International Development is a rather knotty issue, since both of the terms "international" and "development" have ambiguous meanings. In the 1950s, development had a very straight forward meaning. It meant achieving global stability by creating the material and cultural conditions for steady economic growth. Development policies aimed to modernise infrastructure and minds. But once put in practice, this "idea of development" proved perilous. Far from achieving its goals, it created poverty and exclusion where there had been scarcity.

Arturo Escobar (1995) refers to development discourse as the process of articulating knowledge and power through which particular concepts, theories and practices of social change are created and reproduced. Historically, the approach to development in terms of discourse has evolved out of debates on modernisation and Marxist dependency theory rooted in social evolutionism Dependency theories. Departing from the linear models of social progress, this approach to development seeks to articulate the processes and meanings of more nuanced social control and challenges.

In Zhang (2018), English Language development has played an important role in constructing second language learners' social identities through language learning (professional development practices). Previous studies have demonstrated that learners' social identities are beneficial to learners' language development. This paper is a descriptive study using the method of interview, which investigates how social identities are constructed in English as Foreign Language (EFL) learning. It shows that social identity is a dynamic concept and there exists a correlation between learners' social identity construction and their language learning (professional development) development. Social identity is the identity that EFL learners construct actively and it is associated with learners' desires and wishes in the future.

TEACHER ASSOCIATIONS

Elsheikh, Effiong and Coombe (2018) investigate the role of Africa TESOL and its affiliates in providing for and improving the continuous professional development of teachers in their constituencies. A survey and interviews were conducted to ascertain how beneficial attending professional development events are. Findings from the survey suggest that these events help teachers to develop professionally.

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From the content of abstracts or description of TESOL International Association's IGs and IATEFL's SIGs, development is the cutting -edge discourse. Despite change in titles of the SIGs and IGs, all efforts are geared towards the professional development of ELT practitioners. Worthy of note and research interest is the interdisciplinary nature of the IGs and SIGs content description which suggests group dynamics, social identity construction and career pathways for practicing teachers of English as a Foreign Language (EFL), in every part of the world, particularly in Cameroon.

Issues of power inequalities and negotiations, ideology through discourse is evoked and critiqued as models for this study which could expose and resolve some of the global and socio-economic problems which arise between English language teacher Associations, particularly as they try to reach out to their affiliates, with their professional development concepts that are socially determined and may not work for others. This issue is articulated in this study, illustrated by the Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) theory, chosen as the major theoretical framework for this study and supported by the Social Identity Theory (SIT). This of course gives room to group dynamism, which will be redressed in this study, using the Social Identity Theory (SIT), as the second and supportive theoretical framework to illustrate, as indicated above.

Smith and Kuchah (2016) argue not only for more research into English Language Teacher Associations (TAs) but also for research to be carried out by and within (TAs). That is, they advocate their becoming 'Researching TAs' themselves. This suggestion derives from their collaborative work with/ within the Cameroon English Language and Literature Teachers' Association (CAMELTA). In this context, they have initiated and helped to facilitate the development of what they term by analogy with 'systematic' inquiry which is based on members' priorities and officially endorsed by a TA, and which engages members as active participants in what they see as a collective project.

Kuchah (2020) in an online Africa TESOL webinar series on English language teaching in Africa examines early foreign language education in primary schools, myths and realities. He evokes the realities of Africa overcrowded classrooms, lack of classrooms, Francophone West Africa; Benin, Burkina Fasso, Cote d'Ivoire, Guinea, Mali, Mauritania, Senegal. He adds that, Africa is a learning and teaching setting and context which considers the English language as a hot commodity.

Ekembe (2021) posits that research into ELT teacher development and teacher association research has gained currency over the last decade, yet with limited attention paid to how teachers in low- resourced contexts navigate professional development. The literature on teachers' working conditions and the changing perspectives on ELT has been the reason behind seminars and multiple training activities organized on areas considered necessary for teachers in low-resourced contexts. However, the idea of necessity tends to be judged by the 'experts', who determine what work best for their participants. Current-day professional development initiatives require that experiential knowledge of the participants be made the basis of any professional development activities.

Ekembe (2022), researching on Language Teacher Associations within the context of Cameroon, examines the role and value teacher associations have in teacher education. His research is addressed to teacher educators who have a role in supporting the professional development of English language teachers; the role of teacher associations, the challenges they face, the opportunities they provide and what the future may hold.

Below is the presentation of findings based on an assessment of the effective use of CoPs by ELT practitioners within teacher associations and within their workplaces.

METHODOLOGY

Quantitative research is used in this article. A questionnaire was conducted to collect data, in order to ease the assessment of the use of Communities of Practices among English language teachers. The Social Identity Theory (SIT) of Tayfel and Turner (1979) was considered in formulating and administering the Questionnaire.

Sixteen questions were asked during an interview with fifteen Cameroon-based ELT practitioners. The goal was to find out if these teachers faced any difficulties in teaching and needed help. It was also to know if these teachers built and practiced communities of practice, and whether they were aware of the communities of practice and their profits in professional development.

FINDINGS

These findings show the degree to which the use of Communities of Practice is needed to improve teacher professional development and generate job satisfaction in teachers. From research carried out on TESOL practitioners, mid-career ELT 80 percent of them are bored despite enormous efforts from the US Embassy and CAMELTA and joint-TESOL in- service training, local pedagogic inspectors for English, Curriculum, Africa TESOL,

Despite the TESOL International conference and IATEFL Conference attendance by some CAMELTA members and their sharing through exchange seminars back home, there is still need to study and gain education on the professional development discourse trends of the TESOL and IATEFL model and organization of Interest Sections (IS) and Special Interest Groups (SIGs)

From research, most mid-career Primary, Secondary and High School Teachers are frustrated by teaching. As their years of teaching increase, they start considering daily teaching routines as monotonous and boring. Unlike University lecturers who have their niche or specialty, or the medical doctor who specializes at some point, a typical teacher in Cameroon teaches grammar, vocabulary and all the different sections of language teaching alone, for over the years. Pressure from vast syllabi, program deadlines from authorities at ministries of Education and school heads, choked with huge class sizes make these teachers want to quit or improve. Those who long to improve consider TESOL International Association and IATEFL as stepping stones to professional development and more fulfilling careers in ELT.

Even the teachers who benefit from US Embassy and Conferences get more confused because they usually used to limit their scope of thinking to the daily routines of the classroom, not knowing about the interdisciplinary pathways that TESOL and IATEFL create for teachers.

Teachers abandon work and get into businesses they are not gifted in. Some travel abroad for greener pastures. Some record regular absences from school due to lack of interest. Some receive query letters from their school principals while some are frustrated and develop mental depression.

As a way out, knowledge of TESOL International Association's IGs and IATEFL's SIGs are needed to rekindle the hope of the English Language teachers. Research on professional development issues (within communities of practice) of TESOL International Association and IATEFL are therefore very pertinent.

From the above three criteria for collecting data, the following results were got.

Findings from observation and from general observation, it was discovered on the one hand that most mid-career ELT practitioners were bored of teaching, due to either monotony of work or lack of opportunities for professional development. On the other hand, it was discovered that the TESOL International Association and IATEFL have elaborate programmes for communities of practice, professional networking and teacher professional development. These communities of practice could be pathways for the ELT practitioners. This motivated the researcher to investigate further, through notes-taking.

As for findings from notes-taking, notes were taken down from when teachers got into teacher training colleges till when they practiced on the field, to when they sought ways of career improvement through professional development efforts. Also, the phenomenon of most bilingual (English and French) Cameroonian teachers who usually opt to teach English and not French, even the case of those from purely French-speaking backgrounds was also taken note of as a preoccupying aspect that called for a redress through professional development. The above feedback serves as the bases for this study, on TESOL International Association and IATEFL communities of practice, whose interdisciplinary discourses can serve as a spring board for language teachers who want to explore, sustain and renew their professional development commitments as practising English language teachers.

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Findings of research, through a questionnaire showed that teachers have crisis at mid-career stage. They believed that professional development through TESOL International Association and IATEFL CoPs, via CAMELTA and Africa TESOl (affiliates) could give them more satisfaction and create career paths for them.

In question one, among the 15 ELT practitioners questioned on how long they had been teaching, 12 were mid-career practitioners: they had taught within 10and 15 years, giving a total of 75%.

In question two, when interrogated on where they were trained,12 respondents were from Ecole Normale Superieure (ENS); (75%), while 3 were from primary school Teachers' Training College.

Question 3 was on whether the respondents knew about the TESOL International Association and IATEFL.5 respondents said they knew about the associations, making a percentage of 33.3.

In question 4, the research sought out to know where the teachers learned about the TESOL International Association and IATEFL. All the respondents said they knew about these associations through CAMELTA, giving a percentage of 100.

In question 5, 60% of the respondents belonged to a teacher association.

In question 6, 9 respondents belonged to CAMELTA, giving 60%, while 5 were registered members of TESOL and IATEFL, making 33.3%.

Questions 7 and 8 investigated on whether the teachers had ever attended a language teacher international conference before, and which one they attended. Five (5), making 33.3% had once attended a teacher international Conference, while 5 teachers, an equivalence of 33.3% had once attended the TESOL International Convention and IATEFL International Conference.

In question 9 all the 15 respondents belonged to an English language departmental meeting, giving a total of 100%.

In question 10, 100% belonged to the departmental meeting's community of practice; 9 belonged to CAMELTA, (60%), while 5 out of the 9 belonged to TESOL International Association, Africa TESOL and IATEFL, (33.3%).

In question 11, all 15 respondents, making 100% accepted that the exchange and professional development network activities improved teaching and boosted their interest in teaching, career pursuit and research.

In question 12, among other content areas, all the 15 respondents chose the professional development content area as the one they identified with as a community of practice. This gave a percentage of 100.

In question 13, the 15 respondents (100%) considered the interdisciplinarity and discursivity of professional development issues of the English language teachers' associations (TESOL International Association, IATEFL, Africa TESOL and CAMELTA) as important. They said it was a way forward for English language teachers to specialize within the profession of English language teaching.

In question 14, fourteen (14) out of fifteen (15) said as mid-career practitioners, they were bored with teaching. They all considered the communities of practice exchanges as a means of hope and empowerment for the professionals. This gave a percentage of 93.3.%.

In question 15, 6 out of 15 (40%) respondents answered yes to the question asked if they were aware of the vast field and opportunities of ELT which could be got through knowledge of TESOL International Association and IATEFL.

In question 16, 100% responded that they all believed one could benefit from TESOL International Association and IATEFL, in order to create a more impactful life and embrace hope for future career pursuit and research in ELT.

CONCLUSION

From the above data presentation and analysis of pilot research, results have shown that there is need for ELT practitioners in general and African-based practitioners (who are not native speakers of the English language) to embark on professional development/career paths using the TESOL International Association and IATEFL Communities of Practice (CoPs) models. This could open/expose African (Cameroonian) ELT Practitioners to the world of those who have a native control of the English language. This could also create a forum for critical thinking, during which Primary, Secondary and High School teachers could consider specialising on specific content areas of ELT, like the various interdisciplinary IGs and SIGs discourses. It is hoped that specialising on one's area of

professional interest will hence, no longer be a thing for university lecturers only, but will involve teachers from every level of education. This step toward research for the teacher can bring solace and improve teacher health, and enhance job satisfaction, professionalism, specialization and development among ELT practitioners. Also, a research spirit could be nursed among all the teachers, which will make interactions, exchanges and networking more fluid, thus bridging the gaps that may exist among teachers from different levels and continents

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