# COLLABORATIVE PRACTICES IN AN UNMEDIATED ONLINE TESL FORUM

**Muhammad Kamarul Kabilan**
*University Science of Malaysia*

## ABSTRACT

This paper examines the type of collaborative practices that are carried out by Malaysian English language teachers in an unmediated public online TESL forum. The collaborative practices are analysed using a schema adapted from Riding (2001), and are scrutinized in terms of the contents of the new messages posted. Findings yield eight types of collaborative practices. Findings also indicate the teachers' will and desire to collaborate with other teachers in many ways to achieve common goals.

## Introduction

This paper reports a study that was undertaken with the aim of investigating the extent of Malaysian English language teachers' collaborative practices via an unmediated public online TESL (teaching English as a Second Language) forum. One major factor that led to this investigation is the findings from earlier studies by Kabilan (2001) and Kabilan, Yusuf & Khamis (2001). Both studies, which examined teachers' overall uses of the Internet at home and school, implied that Malaysian English language teachers' utilization of the Internet for collaboration purposes were narrow and limited. The studies found that teachers' uses of the Internet were more inclined towards practices that locate materials and ideas for teaching objectives.

To unearth online collaborative practices among teachers, online forums can be effectively exploited because, as suggested by Anderson (1996: 123), online forums or conferences (e-forums) are the most potent instruments to foster Computer Supported Collaborative Learning (CSCL) that can "create a stimulating and supportive learning environment without forcing participants to congregate at a particular time or location". This is mainly because of the advantages of participating in online forums: (1) freedom from time constraints (participants can participate when and if they choose); (2) time for reflection; (3) opportunities to research and validate assertions; and (4) cost effective communication (Anderson, 1996). Evidence from other research also seems to agree with Anderson's findings (see Anderson & Kanuka, 1997; Hammond, 1998; Galanouli & Collins, 2000; Leask & Younie, 2001; and Crosta, 2002).

A close examination of online forums would yield a new perspective on teachers' professional development. By engaging in online forums, teachers constantly go through a cyclic process of reflect, construct and re-reflect on their practices and experiences. This cyclic process involves both the sharing and understanding of self and others' practices, without which the professional development and learning of a teacher would be meaningless. In this respect, one aspect of the online forum that ought to be scrutinized is the content of the message. This would illuminate the practices and experiences of teachers who are collaborating online.

## Method

The online forum chosen is from Cikgu.net (www.cikgu.net) - pronounced as "Cikgu-dot-net". (The word "Cikgu" means teacher in the Malay language). Cikgu.net, launched in March 2000, is an education portal that aims to support and prepare educators, and has partners that include The Education Ministry of Malaysia (MOE), The National Union of the Teaching Profession (NUTP), local universities, newspapers, and educational and publication companies. The site is maintained by MIMOS Berhad, an Information Communication Technology (ICT) R&D (Research & Development) organisation that functions as an advisor to the Malaysian Government on technologies, policies and strategies relating to ICT development. The TESL forum of Cikgu.net is, by far, the most active (in terms of the number of messages posted per-month) TESL-related online forum in Malaysia. It is the premier site for Malaysian English language teachers to meet, exchange ideas and experiences, and to discuss issues related to English language teaching in general and professional problems faced by English teachers.

## The Study

To obtain a sense of understanding, to assist me in analysing, interpreting and comprehending the data collected, I participated in the online forum, from January 2002 till October 2002, which was one school academic year. Crosta (20020) has used a similar strategy to describe her participation in an online course. My involvement, however, was not active in terms of posting messages and starting issues to be discussed, but rather in the form of playing a second fiddle role that encompassed providing information, replying to messages, and giving encouragement, ideas and suggestions.

Data were collected in the form of the contents that were posted in the forum, and analysed accordingly with the intention of examining the utilization of online

Table 1: Message content analysis criteria

| Key | Criterion | Example |
|-----|-----------|---------|
| Teaching | Messages about classroom teaching techniques/approaches | "Has anyone had experience in teaching students with learning...?" |
| Resources | Messages about teaching resources, where to get them, what works, etc | "Where can I find resources on...?" |
| Professional Development & Learning | Messages about learning new, ideas, knowledge, skills etc | "I would like to improve my language competency..." |
| Theoretical issues | Messages about theoretical aspects of the subjects | "The problem with the Communicative approach to ELT...?" |
| Furthering Studies & Research | Messages about furthering studies and conducting research | "I need to know how I can apply for a Masters Degree in TESL" |
| Advertisement | Messages relating to job vacancies, new educational portals, etc. | "There is a job vacancy as a lecturer..." |
| Socializing | Messages that are personal and social in nature, getting to know others, finding old acquaintances, having common aims of intent, etc. | "Has anyone studied in Kuala Lumpur in the early 1990s?" |
| Information on TESL | Messages about gaining or seeking information related to TESL specifically, and education in general etc. | "If I enrol in a TESL degree course, what do I need to learn now so that..." |

Adapted from: Riding (2001: 295)

forums for collaborative practices by English language teachers. To achieve the above objective, the messages were coded using a schema (Table 1), whereby the explicit and implicit ideas behind the contents of the messages were considered. Riding (2001) implemented this strategy to study the use of e-mail discussion groups to create online communities of teachers and enhance their professional training. Since the objective of the study is to understand teachers' use (or the collaborative
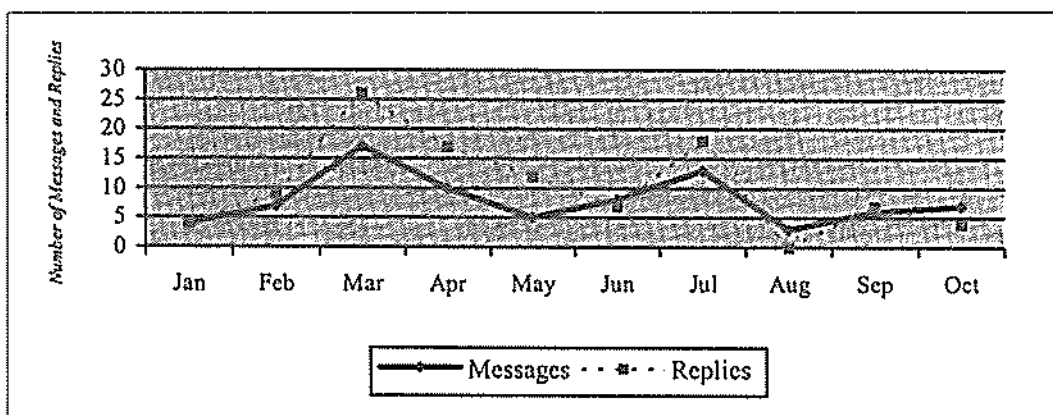
Figure 1: Messages and Replies Posted per Month (January-October 2002)

practices) of the online forum, the focus is on the new messages, and not on the replies. Nevertheless, the functions and contents of the replies are given careful thought and analysed when further clarification and evidence is needed to explicate the collaborative practices of the teachers.

## Findings

### *Postings on the Online Forum*

There were a total of 184 postings from January to October 2002, which would be an average rate of 18 postings per month. Of those 184 postings, 80 were new messages, and the rest were replies to the new messages i.e. 104 replies. The month of March recorded the highest number of postings i.e. 44 postings (18 new messages and 26 replies). This was followed by the month of July with 31 postings (13 new messages and 18 replies). The month of August had the least number of postings with 3 (3 new messages and 0 replies) (Figure 1).

It should be mentioned here that the Cikgu.net TESL online forum is not only frequented by teachers, but also by pre-service teachers, students and other individuals with personal interests. Not only do they post messages, they also reply to the messages when the opportunity is there for them to convey their thoughts. They also query and ask for information, and start discussions. A brief analysis shows that teachers were the main contributors to the online forum i.e. 41 postings of new messages (51.25%), followed by school students with 14 postings (17.50%). Teacher trainees contributed 13 new messages (16.25%) while the remaining 12 postings (15.00%) were from individuals who did not provide any indication as to their identities. Nevertheless, it can be safely concluded that these individuals are related to the field of education in one way or another because the postings reflected

information, queries or discussions regarding education generally and specifically. For example,

> *STUDENT INTAKE TO FORM 1 AND FORM 4 FOR THE YEAR 2003 IS NOW OPEN. Dateline for sending application forms for Form 1 is 10 August 2002 and Form 4, 30 September 2002.*
> [Posted by: KYSM on 13.07.2002 at 09:55]

The pattern of contribution to the online forum is distinct and marked, reflecting the dynamics of the Malaysian school academic year, which begins in January and ends in October (Figure 1). The postings declined drastically during the school holidays, which are in late May, early June, early September, and late October till January the following year. The month of January is a busy month for teachers as they are involved in so many events relating to school orientation for new students, time tabling, streaming classes, and organising co-curriculum activities [Posted by: Sir on 11.01.2002 at 14:55]. Also, during the months of August, September and October, Malaysian teachers are usually busy preparing students for the national examinations at four different levels of age – 12, 15, 17 and 19 – thus explaining the low contributions to the online forum.

*Message Content Analysis*
Based on the criteria of the schema, a thorough analysis (of the message contents) identified eight main practices: (1) Advertisement (17 messages); (2) Information on TESL (17 messages); (3) Furthering Studies & Research (14 messages); (4) Teaching (11 messages); (5) Resources (8 messages) (6) Professional Development & Learning (5 messages); (7) Socializing (3 messages); and (8) Theoretical (1 message). *(Note: For the purpose of this paper, the students' postings, though used in certain aspects and parts of the paper, were ignored in the calculations of types of practices. Also, the number of the type of message content may differ from the number of messages posted because some messages had more than one objective).*

*Advertisements*
Advertisements were the most posted type of messages – 17 new messages. There are four types of advertisements: commercial gains (1 message), events (1 message), non-ELT websites/portals (8 messages), jobs and vacancies (2 messages) and ELT-related website/portals (5 messages). Some of these messages were written in the Malay language. Apart from the one message that advertised the new intake for a

private school (see the message posted by KYSM above), the other messages intend to share and provide some kind of knowledge or information that may benefit teachers in terms of gaining new knowledge and skills, and assisting teachers in getting new teaching and learning resources.

*All teachers and students are welcome to visit a website that contains Mathematics' learning and gaming software (in the Malay language), which are equipped with: a). Movie macromedia flash; b). 2D & 3D animation; c). Mathematic Games at 3 levels of difficulty; d). MIDI music.*
[Translated from the Malay language. Posted by: nosaj on 07.07.2002 at 15:55]

*Hi. This is an announcement. UPM will be organising its Malaysia International Conference on English Language Teaching. It will be held in Seremban in May 2002. For those interested in becoming EL teachers, or who want to know more about ELT, or teachers who want to upgrade their knowledge, this is a good place to go. Contact Dr. Arshad of the Education Faculty (UPM)*
[Posted by: Kabilan on 05.04.02 at 21:22]

*Hi all, just want to inform that there are vacancies for English language teachers at the Language and Translation Centre, USM, Penang. Please visit: http:// registry.usm.my/iklan/iklan2u.htm*
[Posted by: Kabilan on 16.07.02 at 18:27]

*Information on TESL*

There were 10 messages posted by students interested in becoming English language teachers or students intent on embarking on a degree course that is related to ELT. These messages sought clarification and explanation on how the degree could be beneficial to them in future, and what to expect when enrolled in the course:

*I'm now waiting for the May intake (degree program) in TESL. Where can I further my studies after this? And what can I become after finishing my studies?*
[Posted by: emma on 05.04.02 at 14:59]

*I was interested to choose TESL prog. as my 1ˢᵗ choice.... So if I offered in this course so, isn't it hard 4 me to learn about? Erm...isn't TESL is very hard to learn?*
[Posted by: x-factzz on 09.03.02 at 11:14]

There are also another 7 messages that asked for information regarding ELT or education in general. The following messages illuminate the types of information that was sought:

*Anyone know anything about CfBT Educational Services (M) Sdn Berhad? Would appreciate at least their e-address! The 'f' is stylised, by the way.*
[Posted by: TS on 08.06.02 at 13:46]

*I'm looking for the e-mail address of the winners in the previous 'Lesson Plan Contest'. I feel that it's good to exchange ideas with the best brains in the profession. I hope someone can help me with this.*
[Posted by: zeke on 13.07.02 at 10:10]

*Furthering Study and Research*
Teachers also enquired or/and sought advice on furthering their studies, especially towards obtaining a Bachelors Degree or Masters Degree in TESL, and also on research. There were 14 messages posted in Cikgu.net that dealt with this aspect. However, not all messages were posted by professionally trained English language teachers. A couple of these teachers were seeking ways and means of becoming one. For instance,

*I am a graduate with two years of teaching experience. I would like to pursue a Masters in Education (TESL) in a local university (MU). I did apply last year but was rejected because I did not have a certificate or diploma in teaching or education. My first degree was Economics but I have been an English language lecturer in a private college for the past two years. Therefore, I would greatly appreciate it if you could provide me with information as to how I can obtain a Diploma in Teaching or Education in the shortest time possible, so as to qualify for a Masters.*
[Posted by: Anne on 15.04.02 at 17:23]

Teachers also used the forum to garner ideas for their research:

*Still stuck with my instrument. This will be an open-ended questionnaire. Need your opinion and suggestions. So far I have identified the problems, which teachers might have problems with. They are teacher's literary competence, existing materials (module and literary text) available...(I'm stuck at this point)...anyone with any sample of open-ended questionnaire (internet or hardcopy), either on the same topic or a bit similar to my topic that I can adopt and adapt.*
[Posted by: den on 24.03.02 at 23:32]

There were also 5 messages posted by pre-service teachers, who asked help with their assignments and final year projects. One pre-service teacher asked,

*This coming June I will propose my final year project (fyp) but what worries me is, until now I haven't found any topic yet. Does anyone have some? I would like to do something related to the teaching of literature in school and educational fields in general. ...I would be happy if anyone out there could send me any suggestions.*

[Posted by: teslian11 on 17.04.02 at 20:15]

## Teaching

Eleven new messages that have references to teaching were posted in Cikgu.net. These messages were posted both by in-service and pre-service teachers, and encompassed a wide range of aspects of English language teaching in Malaysia:

### Teaching English in Malaysia

*I'm a year 3 MARA TESOL student in Edinburgh. I'm coming home for a 3-month teaching placement in one of the MRSMs in April. I already went on a placement once back in 2000, but I was really frustrated after realizing that I didn't have a clue on what's going on in teaching English in Malaysia nowadays. Hoping that I didn't come across as ignorant, I would really appreciate it if anybody would be so kind as to give me a brief summary on what to expect when I come home to teach in any MRSMs.*

[Posted by: Nazree on 10.01.02 at 21:14]

*Bahasa Melayu (Malay Language) has long been part of the national heritage that we all should be proud of as Malaysians. It's our language and it's our identity. Its role is undeniably significant enough in uniting the whole nation under one roof, I can't help but shudder at the idea of losing it...much has been said to undermine its ability in the education system. Hence, should English take over its position as the medium of instruction in school and educational institutions especially when teaching core subjects like Mathematics and Science? Give me your opinion.*

[Posted by: wonder on 12.04.02 at 16:08]

### Teaching Writing

*To start the ball rolling; does anyone here have any experience in carrying out process writing to a class of 40 students of below average proficiency? Any tips you can share?*

[Posted by: sher on 03.02.02 at 15:39]

## Teaching Grammar

*Should we go back to the teaching of grammar?*
[Posted by: anis on 07.07.02 at 16:11]

## Teaching Literature

*I am a trainee teacher and I have some problems teaching Potato People to my students. They understand the story, but I have to find some way to make the lessons more interesting instead of just comprehension. Any suggestions?*
[Posted by: Marsha on 04.04.02 at 02:24]

## Teaching Exam-oriented Subjects

(note: MUET stands for Malaysian University English Test, which a student must pass in order to be considered for a place in local universities).

*I've just finished my diploma in education -- KPLI TESL - and have recently been posted to a secondary school. The problem now is I am given the responsibility to teach MUET which I know nothing about as I have never been exposed to it during my practicum. Please give me guidance on how to teach MUET to my students. For u'r information, I am not a TESL degree holder.*
[Posted by: syazana on 30.06.02 at 18:00]

Students also posted 4 messages regarding the MUET examination. They asked for teachers' help, specifically in terms of preparing for the exam:

*Can u give me knowledge about how to prepare for M.U.E.T exam*
[Posted by: nor naisya on 09.02.02 at 13:03]

*I have a problem about MUET books. I want to buy a MUET book. But when I go to bookstore, I see many books about MUET. I don't know which one I should buy....*
[Posted by: amri on 18.02.02 at 23:06]

## Teaching in Rural Areas

*Does anyone here knows what are the best methods to teach English in the rural areas? ...Thanks for your response.*
[Posted by: anis on 07.07.02 at 15:45]

*Innovative and Creative Teaching Ideas*

> *I need help with this particular topic (fin 4). I intend to teach around the topic
> 'recycle' but I can't even make out the recycling jingle recently played on the
> radio/TV...by the way, I need something 'personalised' and able to attract the ss
> attention...it seems to me that recycling paper (though noble) – as in the textbook
> – has become 'too' common...HELPPPPP!*
> [Posted by: v witch on 16.07.02 at 18:27]

*Resources*

English language teachers used, or attempted to use the forum, to find and share materials and ideas, particularly related to teaching and learning materials. There were 8 new messages concerning resources, which were in various forms:

> *I would like to know where to find/buy documentaries VCD/DVD to teach
> guided writing for example something on pollution, nature or endangered
> species.*
> [Posted by: sheriza on 30.10.02 at 20:08]

> *We are the first batch for English for Science and Technology teaching 1-week
> course at Maktab Perguruan Keningau, September 2002. There you can find sample
> teaching materials for use in your classrooms. Also, we can exchange ideas and
> together upload materials for our benefit. Come and join http://groups.yahoo.com/
> group/keningauguest/*
> [Posted by: ismariwan on 05.09.02 at 14:11]

*Professional Development & Learning*

Five new messages posted were concerning teachers' professional development and learning. Of those 5 messages, 3 were related to teachers wanting to improve their language competency:

> *Hi everyone...is there any English course conducted by Education Ministry or
> any institutions? Really looking forward for any..oh...for your information...I'm
> a primary school teacher...thx.*
> [Posted by: nie on 27.030.02 at 22:11]

> *I'm a non-optionist (TESL) teacher. I need suggestions to improve my English.
> I want to further my studies.*
> [Posted by: daniah on 23.10.02 at 22:19]

One teacher was worried about becoming a burned out teacher. He desperately sought help from the forum:

> *I have been painstakingly teaching F3 and F5 FELDA students for the past few years and I think I have run out of steam. I'm close to be a member of the burnout teachers club at such an early period of my career. I feel tired mentally and physically. Any tips to revive my fast depleting teaching stamina?*
> [Posted by: imran on 04.09.02 at 18:44]

Another teacher was contemplating the idea of part time work in an area of her interest, furthering her studies and improving her command of English -- all simultaneously!

> *Hi. I am a new teacher and I have to continue my studies. I'm interested in becoming a translator (maybe part time) however I don't have a good command of English (yet). I'm looking forward to receiving ideas and comments on how I can achieve my goals.*
> [Posted by: honeywati on 02.10.02 at 20:37]

## *Socializing*

English language teachers have also utilized Cikgu.net to rekindle friendships with long lost friends (2 messages) and classmates, or to share common aims (1 message)

> *Nice to see that the seniors are still in contact...funny how TESL UKM batches get along...rumour has it that the odd batches get along with other odd numbers vice versa...hmm.. I wonder how true...*
> [Posted by: Jr. on 27.03.02 at 23:52]

> *Anybody going to the MELTA National Conference on Reading?*
> [Posted by: NuR on 08.04.02 at 10:25]

## *Theoretical*

One message dealt with the theoretical issue of ELT:

> *There was an error in the question. Actually it's regarding the problematic issues in the 'communicative approach' (in language teaching and learning). TQ. My next question is regarding morphology, syntax and semantics. How are these 3 fields related to each other?*
> [Posted by: vanaja on 30.09.02 at 16:08]

## Discussion and Conclusion

The findings provide some interesting insights into various aspects of collaborative practices of Malaysian English language teachers in an online forum. One general conclusion that can be observed is that there exists an indication of collaboration efforts among the teachers in the attempt to enhance their professional development and learning. The content of the messages that were posted too point to the fact that teachers held high regard for seeking, sharing and exchanging ideas, with the sole intention of helping each other and achieving similar goals. They also displayed selflessness when they used their time and energy to post meaningful and useful messages for other teachers to utilize.

The findings also demonstrated the type of collaborative practices that Malaysian English language teachers are involved in an online TESL forum. The content of the new messages posted expressed the presence of teachers' will and desire to learn and seek new knowledge and skills from other teachers. They also seriously viewed sharing their knowledge, practices and experiences with others, thus confirming their beliefs and views of what an ideal practice, or practices, of teaching should be. They too sought information that may assist them with their professional lives generally, and teaching and learning specifically. The teachers asked for advice that would alleviate their problems, and teaching tips that cater for innovative and creative teaching. They also sought explanations and clarification regarding ELT matters that are alien to them, and also initiated discussions on current issues relating to education and ELT.

All the above is aptly proven by the data presented earlier. Nevertheless, a concise analysis of the replies to the initial messages reflect the lack of the number of teachers who were directly involved as part of a collaborative, sustaining and cohesive practising unit. Most of the teachers were 'seasonal' contributors. They emerged, and were active for a while before submerging, and never re-emerging again. Some were visible in the beginning of the year, and then vanished for the next 10 months or so, and only resurfaced in the last two months. Quite a number of the teachers were 'one-timers' – posted one message, got what they were looking for, and never posted another message again. There are many reasons for these patterns of online behaviour, which I shall not dwell on, but the intriguing aspect of this situation is the core community of the online forum remained intact, leading to its survival. The core of the community, which was made up of a group of teachers, made it possible for the continuing existence and activeness of the forum.

My personal involvement in this study has enabled me to decipher the collaborative practices more accurately. It has also helped me to digest the immense amount of data that needed coding, analysing and understanding. To conclude, the

findings of this study have been able to dislodge claims by previous studies that there is little collaborative practices among Malaysian English language teachers, but there remain, in my opinion, other related issues that need to be seriously addressed:

1. The number of teachers who are really involved in online collaborative practices in this study does not portray the real situation
2. The types of collaborative practices are still questionable — discussions of personal teaching practices and reflective teaching are almost nil.
3. Initiating discussions is lackadaisical.

It can be seen from this study that collaborative practices among Malaysian English language teachers are flourishing, but still limited, I feel. It needs greater and concentrated efforts from educational authorities to facilitate online professional development activities that encourage the collaborative practices of a teacher. Thus the implications of this study for English language teachers' professional development are quite serious. One that needs urgent attention is the formulation of a formal and structured online professional development programme. In other developed nations – especially the United Kingdom and United States – such online events have been in progress since the Internet's attributes were expanded to encompass networking and collaborating engagements. Here in Malaysia, a structured and formal model of online professional development for teachers is non-existent. Most teachers, like the teachers in this study, were "lone rangers" in their personal quest to enhance their professional development via the Internet.

The Internet (in this case, online forum) has successfully built a community of teachers who support others in need. This is a positive development that ought to be propagated to other teachers. One way is by ensuring that all teachers are exposed to the Internet and its tools, and also to its uses and attributes. In-service English teachers, who have no knowledge of the Internet, ought to be trained and given enough exposure so that they will be confident in utilizing the Internet for professional learning purposes (Kabilan, 2003). Access to the Internet must also be provided in schools, along with the prerequisite professional support that comes along with it – technical, facilities, financial, encouragement and motivation, and supervision. School administrators and education policy makers must give these serious consideration.

# References

Anderson, T. 1996. The virtual conference: extending professional education in cyberspace. *International Journal of Educational Telecommunications*, 2(2/3): 121-135.

Anderson, T. & Kanuka, H. 1997. On-line forums: new platforms for professional development and group collaboration. *Journal of Computer Mediated Communication*, 3(3): 1-15. (available online) http://www.ascusc.org/jcmc/vol3/issue3/anderson.html (June 19, 2002).

Crosta, L. 2002. The online learning environment: a personal experience of collaboration. *Proceedings of the Third International Conference Jointly Organised by the University of Sheffield and Lancaster University*, p.364-368.

Galanouli, D. & Collins, J. 2000. Using unmediated computer conferencing to promote reflective practice and confidence building in initial teacher education. *Journal of Information Technology and Teacher Education*, 9(2): 237-254.

Hammond, M. 1998. Learning through on-line discussion: what are the opportunities for professional development and what are the characteristics of online writing. *Journal of Information Technology and Teacher Education*, 7(3): 331-346.

Kabilan, M. K. 2003. Malaysian Secondary English language teachers' practices and experiences of online professional development. Unpublished PhD Thesis (in progress). National University of Malaysia, Bangi, Selangor.

Kabilan. M. K. 2001. Professional development via Internet: current structure and trends in Malaysia. Paper presented at the National Staff Development Council's 33rd Annual Conference. December 1-5, 2001, Denver, Colorado.

Kabilan, M. K., Yusuf, Y. & Khamis, M. 2001. Current practices of professional development of English language teachers: some trends and suggestions. Paper presented at the International Conference on Teacher Education, July 16-17, 2001. Shah Alam, Malaysia.

Leask, M. & Younie, S. 2001. The European Schoolnet. An online European community for teachers? A valuable professional resource? *Teacher Development*, 5(2): 157-175.

Riding, P. 2001. Online teacher communities and continuing professional development. *Teacher Development*, 5(3): 283- 295