The 8th International Language for Specific Purposes (LSP) Seminar - Aligning Theoretical Knowledge with Professional Practice

Digital Portfolio and Professional Development of Language Teachers

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Abstract

A professional portfolio is an evolving collection of carefully selected or composed professional thoughts, goals, and experiences that are threaded with reflection and self-assessment (Evans, 1995:1). This paper intends to illustrate a successful effort of a group of English language teachers in becoming technology-proficient in their teaching while creating their teacher e-portfolios. In addition to exploiting their knowledge on computer technology and technical requirements of developing their teacher e-portfolio, such effort also contributes to language teacher professional development. This research looks at how the teachers documented, organized, created and shared information and materials in designing their teacher e-portfolio. Findings from content analysis, reflections and interviews indicate that all teachers agreed that the e-portfolio indeed contributed to their professional development. This is confirmed by the responses given by the participants whereby they felt that their professional development has improved after developing the e-portfolio.

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Selection and/or peer-review under responsibility of the LSP 2012 Committee, Language Academy, Universiti Teknologi Malaysia.

Keywords: Teacher education; teacher e-portfolio; technology-proficient; professional development; English language teachers

1. Introduction

This research intends to study a group of English language teachers’ attempts at becoming technology-proficient in their teaching which include the teachers’ technology practices and views on the development and use of Electronic Portfolio (E-portfolio) or Teacher electronic portfolio as a medium for developing and

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enhancing their Teacher Professional Development (TPD). In general, the research aims to elicit information on how the development of E-portfolio could make the teachers technology-proficient and how it develop their professionalism.

The introduction of technology nearly two decades ago has made our lives more significantly meaningful in every aspect. From military, business, entertainment to education, sharing of knowledge provided by technology has allowed people to gain more knowledge where everything has become transparent, quick and mobile. In education, for example, teachers and students are learning new trends and skills in using technology in teaching and learning.

Technology is a meditational tool that enables learners to expand their oral expression, acquire new language, learn about cross-cultural perspectives, and interact with content knowledge [2]. National Report [13] claimed that 20 percent of teachers feel confident of using technology in the classroom. This is because in recent years, ESL educators found that the traditional methods are less effective and attractive especially for younger learners. As technology helps learners to shape their world in new ways, a new approach for the teaching of ESL is needed with regards to high development of technology and changing paradigm of learners. Hence, technology has now become increasingly a part of language study. This is especially true since creating an E-portfolio can develop teachers' as well as students' multimedia technology skills [3].

1.1 What is Teacher E-Portfolio

An electronic portfolio uses electronic technologies, allowing the portfolio developer to collect and organize portfolio artifacts in many media types: audio, video, graphics, and text [4]. Furthermore, an electronic portfolio is not a haphazard collection of artifacts, such as a digital scrapbook or a multimedia presentation) but rather a reflective tool that demonstrates growth over time [5].

An e-portfolio is more than a simple collection. However, it can also serve as an administrative tool to manage and organize work created with different applications and control where anyone can see or discuss the work. The benefits of an e-portfolio typically derive from the exchange of ideas and feedback between the author and those who view and interact with the e-portfolio. In addition, the author's personal reflection on the work inside an e-portfolio helps create a meaningful learning experience.

When describing the many uses of e-portfolios, three broad categories emerge: student e-portfolio, teacher e-portfolio and institutional e-portfolio. A student e-portfolio, for example, can be used to showcase accomplishments. It may be shared with a prospective employer or used to document specific learning outcomes in a course and can include description, rationale and discussion of digitized artifacts, resulting in a powerful tool for representation, reflection and revision. Below are examples of a student e-portfolio:
Teacher e-portfolio is a digital portfolio where teachers organize and combine their teaching materials for sharing and for use with students and in teaching. This electronic portfolio uses electronic technologies, allowing the portfolio developer to collect and organize portfolio artifacts in many media types (audio, video, graphics, and text) (Barrett [4]). They are used in academia for various purposes, such as for assessment, for career planning, and for documenting and demonstrating personal learning and growth over time by evaluating the presentation’s effectiveness. For the purpose of this research, teacher E-portfolio is designed to showcase themselves as teachers, organize (and share) their teaching materials and resources, their career and growth over time.

These are the suggested contents of the teacher e-portfolio designed for this research:

a. Biodata
b. Teaching philosophy
c. Clubs and Organization,
d. Courses I’m Teaching,
e. Teaching resources
f. Current timetable,
g. Resume (CV),
h. Bookmarks or websites for learning and teaching English
i. Hobbies and interests
j. Contact

Teacher e-portfolios are concise, annotated collections of teachers’ work and things they have accomplished, in and outside the classroom. What makes them different from traditional portfolios is that they can include scanned or digital photos, video and sound clips, animations, recordings of students, text, traditional writings and drawings. With this process, teachers have gained valuable experience in selecting the types of materials they collect as well as ways in which to store the information. Teachers are no longer confined to maintain a portfolio in a binder and this is one option being electronically.

Besides, teacher e-portfolios are invaluable because they are a collection of work produced by a teacher. The portfolio is designed to highlight and demonstrate the teachers' talents, knowledge and skills in teaching. They provide important insights into a teacher’s individual talents and beliefs about education. Below are examples of teacher e-portfolio:
Figure 3: Sample Teacher E-portfolio

Figure 4: Sample Teacher E-portfolio – Sharing of materials
I was born on 21 June 1970 (please do the simple math about my age on your own...) in Johor Bahru and was given the name Ruzana by my father... which means tranquility in Arabic. Even though you need people to call you by your full name (due to this good meaning), I will still be called either ‘Bahau’ or ‘Zana’. The first one is my nickname called by my family and relatives... while the latter is more frequently used among my friends. Obviously I am a Javanese since my father is from the ethnic but he did not ever ask me to convert to Javanese... I don’t have the language. Not to say that I forget my roots... but simply the fact that I was not taught seriously to speak Javanese by my father. I suppose my VCA’s role for this file was to reach out to the broader section of the family when I was young and he kindly had the time to give me advice. I still remember the advice that he gave me on speaking the language. Since my identity is not Javanese, I am now unable to convert to Javanese is a loss to me... and I regret for that because I’m proud to be a Javanese...

I had my early education both elementary and secondary, in Johor Bahru. From 1988 to 1990, I did my pre-university years at UTM (then ITM) Presences Studies Centre in Shah Alam and later on underwent my undergraduate studies in TESL under ITM (UKM twinning programme). I graduated in 1994 with an Ed (TTE) degree.

My teaching career started in mid 1992 when I was posted to a rural school - SMK Seruan, Pekan, Pahang. It is a small but poverty hitting village. I was the first ever English graduate teacher teaching there. Serving five and a half years in Seruan really enriched my independent level and I became a stronger person...

Figure 5: Sample Teacher E-portfolio

Figure 6: Sample Teacher E-portfolio
2. Literature Review

2.1 Enhancing ICT and Computer Skills through Teacher E-portfolio

With the emergence of the e-knowledge era, it is insufficient for teachers to look for the wealth of information only. It is a matter of using the information gained and applying it in their life or career. Therefore, teachers need to broaden their knowledge, share their knowledge with others, synthesize it, evaluate it and think of ways to make use of it in their career. In this era, teachers are not only competing with their close colleagues in Malaysia to be successful; they are also competing with other teachers around the globe in teaching, literally and socially. This is because English language is used by all to communicate for many reasons, for instance, commerce, education, socialization and so forth. Muhammad Kamarul Kabilan [9] states that the usage of the English language as lingua franca by people around the globe and ICT lingo must be taken as a serious matter for all ESL teachers to master ICT knowledge and adapt it in their teaching to ensure Malaysia can become part of developed countries by the year 2020.

Thus, it is important for teachers to be aware of the challenges that they face today. Therefore, the development of E-portfolio can be seen as one method that can provide support for them with each other and enhance their ICT skills. It is because ICT can perhaps save their busy timetable. On the other hand, ICT tools also help teachers to be competent according to the core competences in teacher professional development like teaching competence, language competence and social competence [11]. In this digital era, teachers must change their way of thinking, solving problems, doing tasks, reflecting on themselves and their career using ICT to be able to explore various information that they may not exposed beforehand and apply their knowledge in their lesson. They also need to be able to be competent in their thinking whether it is on how to solve their everyday problems, barriers in using ICT in their teaching, improve themselves and their profession et cetera. It is because acquiring knowledge is a lifelong process.

In addition, teachers need to be reflective and critical to help them in finding alternative ways of inventing new methods of teaching. One of the practical ways to do aside from discussing with their colleagues in school office or teachers’ room is by developing e-portfolio and perhaps sharing their thinking with other teachers, hence considering ICT as an open source to continuously discuss, evaluate and improve ESL teaching approaches as well as its methods. As what Muhammad Kamarul Kabilan [9] has stated, teacher professional development in the national school ICT project like Smart School produces creative teachers that may enable them to find new methods of teaching as well as other innovative findings throughout their teaching career. Therefore, we can say that online support as well as offline is needed in order to improve teacher professional development among the teachers. Teachers need to strike a balance between these two different ways of developing themselves to be able to strive unexpected challenges in the future of this k-knowledge era for their students as the leaders of the next generation of a developed country after 2020.

Basically, it all depends on teachers’ intentions. They need to overcome their weaknesses in using ICT and improve themselves by finding solutions to their problems with other teachers and constantly propose for effective module of training whether by attending courses, seminars, workshops and so on. Furthermore, teachers must not only rely on the training only but they need to try to explore ICT independently to be applied in their teaching.

2.2 The relationship of ICT/Computer Skills and Lifelong Learning Skills to Teacher Professional Development

There are many advantages that can be gained for both teachers and students when teachers apply ICT in their teaching, hence, it is very important to reform conventional teaching and learning process to adapt with the emergence of the new digital literacy. Therefore, it all depends on teachers’ will on deciding to use the tool provided in ICT.
One of the ways that can be used to show how ICT relates with teacher professional development is the existence of online communities that provide functions for teachers to interact with each other for knowledge sharing. Research areas in CALL are now emphasizing on CMC where online conversation is seen as a place where teachers can support their colleagues to improve their professional growth. Hawkes and Romiszowski [18], find that CMC in ICT provides teachers functions where they can improve themselves personally and professionally. This is also parallel with Leask et.al [17] who believed that teachers’ continual learning can be helped by ICT due to its potential in providing online support which saves teachers’ busy schedule in schools’ administration. Online forum serves as free conference centre for teachers despite conventional professional development programme. Furthermore, it can also help several teachers to confront their fears in adapting technology in their classroom. It is very important because only when teachers overcome their phobia to technology, their students will be able to use ICT in their learning not limited to online or technology activities that are more to leisure and entertainment only. Thus, teacher professional development may enable teachers to perform better in their profession within their own time, place and environment. Moreover, support given by them to each other in online community may contribute to teachers’ strength in continuing their career and give space to reflect on their pedagogical approach.

In addition, Warschauer and Kern [12] summarize that online distance education studies emphasize on three important aspects which include language communication and its development, cultural studies realisation and literacy growth and its relationship with personal characteristics. Additionally, Wan Fara Adlina Wan Mansor and Mohamad Hassan Zakaria [11] conceptualize on how teacher professional development should contain three important competences: teaching, language and social. On the other hand, the participation of teachers in online communication may also help teachers to be technology-literate where they are more skillful in handling technology devices and application tools, thus, enabling them to be competent in the use of technology to achieve personal satisfaction and professional recognition.

Furthermore, critical thinking skills in terms of broadening own knowledge on teaching, for example, must also be considered in the ICT and teacher professional development programme. This is because teachers’ participation in any online activities may encourage and motivate them to ponder to latest issues and new method of delivering English language lessons. This may encourage teachers to reflect on themselves personally and professionally. Their critical thinking may create any possible alternative teaching method of new findings in the teaching of the English language subject.

3. The Study

The instruments used to collect the data are content analysis on the e-portfolio, the participants’ reflections, and interview. The participants are twenty English language teachers from different schools in Johor Bahru, primary and secondary schools. The interview was conducted to gain information on how the development of teacher e-portfolio make them technology-proficient, as well as develop their professionalism. The participants were required to reflect on guided questions related to the process of developing their Teacher E-portfolio. This data were analysed qualitatively and descriptively.

First, the procedure started with the selection of participants where convenient sampling was applied. The respondents of this research were twenty English language teachers from different schools in Johor Bahru, either primary or secondary schools. They are required to create an E-portfolio for about six weeks and they were given guidelines and some briefing about how to create the E-portfolio and several tips to design the E-portfolio effectively before they start doing it. In other word, the researcher trained them to create the E-portfolio. During this period, participants are required to write their own reflection about each phases of e-portfolio development. Participants wrote three reflection journals based on their experiences and opinions while developing the e-portfolio in order to answer all the research questions. The researcher provides further guidance and minimum requirements in order to write the reflection.
After they completed the six weeks duration, content-analysis was done on their e-portfolio. Then, the interview was conducted. Next, the analysis of the data was carried out. Lastly, the final step, the write-up was done.

4. Findings and Discussion

4.1 Creating Teacher E-Portfolio Makes the Teachers Technology-Proficient

During the six week of training, a total of twenty teachers were involved in the process of creating e-portfolio. Altogether, a total of twenty teacher e-portfolios were created from the training. The teachers chose to create their portfolios using a variety of web based tools, such as Free Website Templates, FrontPage, Googlesites, and Wix.com. Below are few authoring tools that the teachers used to create their e-portfolio:

The use of various web-based tools to develop teacher e-portfolio shows that teacher explored their knowledge on technology and technical requirements. Each web based tool contributes to effective uses of technology because it requires the teacher to use their technology skills and knowledge in order to develop teacher e-portfolio. Below are few examples of teacher e-portfolio which requires the teachers to use their technology skills and knowledge.

![Figure 7: Teacher E-portfolio](image)

The implementation of teacher e-portfolio should be addressed as a development process because each stage of e-portfolio development makes them technology proficient. First, teachers start at a basic level where they browse and search for relevant teaching and learning materials. Then, they proceed with planning of contents, documenting, organizing and finally designing as they gain skills from each stage. Below are the reflections from the teachers. Notice how it makes them technology proficient.
Teacher 1

*After completing the e-portfolio, I perceived the use of computers in a more positive way. My skills in using programs on computer are fairly extended and enhanced. I have now familiar with PowerPoint, Yahoo Group, Googlesites and Wix. I even got the chance to learn how to create my own personal e-portfolio using Wix.*

Teacher 4

*By doing the E-Portfolio, I was able to revive my tech-savvy brain and work on it with ease. I had so much fun playing around with Weebly and kind of engaged in it till the completion of my E-Portfolio development.*

Teacher 15

*I became familiar with the relevant technologies required for designing and publishing a webpage over the internet. ....... I got to know essential skills for designing E-portfolios such as signing up in free domain providers on the internet and the basic graphic designing of a page.*

From the reflections above, it can be seen that e-portfolio can be used as a platform for teachers to become technology savvy, where it develops their ICT skills, competencies and creativity. The teacher e-portfolio program has taken our teachers a step further into the world of technology integration. Teachers are now developing their own e-portfolios that include lesson plans, personal documents and integration activities, in order to meet the technology standards for their profession. We see the teachers becoming more confident in their own use of technology, and therefore using the technology more in the classroom.

4.2 Creating Teacher E-Portfolio Develops Teachers’ Professionalism

The participants reflected various impacts of online forum are having on them in developing their professional competencies. According to Wan Fara Adlina Wan Mansor & Mohamad Hassan Zakaria [11], in order for teachers to develop professionally, they must have the teaching competence, social competence and linguistic competence which complement one another to develop professionally.

From the responses, it can be stated that all teachers agreed that the e-portfolio indeed contributed to their professional development. This is confirmed by the responses given by the participants whereby they felt that their professional development has improved after developing the e-portfolio. The teachers described their experiences as:

Teacher 3

*Teacher E-portfolio encourages me to upgrade my knowledge on teaching as I share teaching and learning materials with other teachers.*

Teacher 4

*Upgrade knowledge on ICT skills and acquire lifelong ICT skills as there are lots of hands on practice while developing e-portfolio*

Teacher 11

*By creating and updating an E-portfolio a teacher’s previous works and lesson plans can look well-ordered and efficient enough to others and himself.*
From the feedback received, it can be concurred that all teachers attributed their improvement in professional development to teacher e-portfolio. They were able to access other teachers’ materials on teaching, be prepared to train others and they also know how to make the classroom ambience more enjoyable for the students. The effective construction and use of teaching e-portfolio exploits multimedia and the linking capabilities of electronic environments to provide an authentic representation of teaching and learning.

In a typical oral question-and-answer interview, you can explain how you taught a certain lesson or unit, but with a portfolio, you can show evidence of how and why the way you taught that lesson worked best for your class. Under this operating process mechanism, teachers can reflect upon the strengths and weaknesses of their teaching and really stage themselves in the educational field to manage students’ actual learning. It is also interesting to highlight here that through online forum, they have been able to broaden their social network and support group locally. Thus, provided them the social competence needed.

5. Conclusions and Implications

The development of teacher e-portfolio brings many benefits to the teachers especially in enhancing their ICT skills and professional development. In addition, the development of e-portfolio certainly has become the right platform for them to seek lifelong learning. In general, teachers can use their e-portfolio not just for knowledge-sharing but also to collaborate with other teachers as well as provide opportunities for students to learn outside the classroom. Such collaborations among teachers would make a great impact on them as professionals, mainly through lifelong learning as mentioned earlier.

New generation of English language teachers should be made aware of the use of CMC tools such as e-portfolio in enhancing their ICT skills and knowledge. They would be more technology-proficient as they are able to fully utilize the computer and internet facilities to aid them in their teaching thus producing a new breed of teachers who are computer-savvy. In the future, they certainly will be using more computer technology in their teaching and learning as they have more experiences and knowledge through the development of the teacher e-portfolio.

Acknowledgements

This work is supported by the Universiti Teknologi Malaysia Research University Grant (RUG) Vot 03J90.

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