

TeachingEnglish
ELT Research Papers

Supporting novice language teachers: Perceptions of a tutor-moderated online community of practice

Nicola Halenko and Neil Walker

In collaboration with



**University of
Central Lancashire**
UCLan

ISBN 978-1-915280-69-5

Published by the **British Council**

British Council
1 Redman Place
Stratford
London
E20 1JQ

2025

www.teachingenglish.org.uk/publications-research

© Nicola Halenko and Neil Walker

Citation:

Halenko, N., & Walker, N. (2025). *Supporting novice language teachers: Perceptions of a tutor-moderated online community of practice*. British Council. <https://doi.org/10.57884/7BJR-8235>

TeachingEnglish

ELT Research Papers

Supporting novice language teachers: Perceptions of a tutor-moderated online community of practice

Nicola Halenko and Neil Walker

About the authors

Dr Nicola Halenko is a Senior Lecturer in TESOL and Applied Linguistics at the University of Central Lancashire, UK. She has been involved in English language teaching for over 25 years in Europe, Australia and East Asia, as a teacher, teacher trainer and researcher. Her research interests are in the fields of second language acquisition (pragmatics), teacher training and world Englishes. Dr Nicola Halenko: NHalenko@lancashire.ac.uk

Dr Neil Walker is a Senior Lecturer in TESOL and Applied Linguistics at the University of Central Lancashire in the UK, and teaches on BA and MA TESOL programmes. He has taught and trained teachers for over 25 years in many places, including China, Thailand, Bulgaria, Canada, Colombia, Ecuador, Algeria, USA and the UK. His research interests include the distributed practice effect and incidental language learning, novice teachers and task-based teacher training. Dr Neil Walker: NWalker4@lancashire.ac.uk

Abstract

The struggle of novice language teachers (NLTs) transitioning from supportive training environments to their first teaching posts is well documented. In extreme cases, where appropriate support is not available, teachers often leave the profession because they cannot cope with the high demands of their job and the associated emotional stress.

Online communities of teachers have become a growing source of much-needed professional peer support. Through online interactions, teachers can connect with like-minded peers for practical tips, resource-sharing and emotional support. Social networking sites (SNSs) such as Facebook are increasingly seen as valuable hosting platforms for these communities. While there is growing research on how informal networks (created by teachers themselves) evolve in SNS spaces, little attention has been paid to formal online spaces, purposefully established by teacher educators to bridge the gap between training and initial teaching.

The study was organised in two phases. Phase 1 used an online survey and collected data from 43 NLTs who described the challenges they faced in their initial teaching posts. In Phase 2, ten NLTs participated in an online community of practice using a private Facebook group to share experiences, offer advice and provide support while teaching. The group was set up by their teacher educators (also the authors of this paper) to examine the participants' perceptions of the value of this kind of support mechanism.

Results firstly showed that classroom behaviour and heavy workloads, for instance, are still a major cause of teacher concern. Secondly, and more encouragingly, the opportunity to engage with like-minded others in an online professional community, moderated by their tutors, was found to be highly valued. Primarily, the community benefited most from the giving and receiving of emotional support and sharing practical teaching ideas. Findings suggest that tutor-moderated online communities of practice may offer additional benefits to work-based, informal, or large-scale communities of practice.



Contents

1. Introduction	8
2. Literature review and theoretical framework	10
2.1 Novice teacher challenges	10
2.2 Communities of Practice (CoPs)	10
2.3 Social networking sites (SNS) for professional development	11
3. Methodology	12
3.1 Phase 1: Questionnaires	12
3.2 Phase 2: Participation in the online CoP and interviews	12
3.2.1 Participants	12
3.2.2 Procedure	12
3.2.3 Data analysis	14
4. Findings and discussion	16
4.1 Research question 1: What are the challenges NLTs face in their post-certificate teaching roles?	16
4.2 Research question 2: How do NLTs perceive the value of a post-cert, closed, online CoP established by teacher educators?	19
4.2.1 Emotional and social support	19
4.2.2 Practical teaching support	22
4.2.3 Tutor contributions	24
4.2.4 NLT involvement	25
4.2.5 Size of the online CoP	26
4.3 Summary of findings	27
5. Limitations and future research	29
6. Recommendations	30
7. Conclusion	31
References	32
Appendices	35

1

Introduction

Research on language teacher development frequently characterises the post-training years as a period of anxiety and critical development (Farrell, 2003; 2009; 2012; 2016a). Too often there is an expectation that on completion of a short- or long-term pre-service training programme, training providers have done their job, and candidates are apparently ready to enter the teaching profession. However, as Kiely and Askham (2012) highlight, it is almost impossible for pre-service training programmes to fully prepare newly skilled staff given the diverse teaching contexts, age groups and curricula which they will experience in their first teaching posts. Instead, Kiely and Askham (2012) realistically describe post-training competency as 'readiness for work' or 'practice-ready in a TESOL-way' at best. Crucially, novice language teachers (NLTs), taken to mean newly qualified, post-training teachers working in an educational environment (Farrell, 2012), have not had the opportunity to build strategies for dealing with the specific demands of a new teaching post or develop their professional skills more broadly.

These characterisations of NLTs' experiences suggest a need for ongoing, post-training professional development, but this appears lacking in many teaching contexts. As Mandel (2006) concludes, NLTs are generally expected to navigate and drive their own teacher development, without adequate support. NLTs involved in mentorship schemes, for instance, have reported mixed (mainly negative) experiences in terms of quality and quantity of support offered (Brannan & Bleistein, 2012; Farrell, 2016a). As Farrell (2012) summarises, 'unfortunately, supportive environments are the exception rather than the rule' (p. 436). As a result, empirical investigations into the experiences of NLTs, particularly in their first year of teaching, repeatedly report wide-ranging personal, social and psychological challenges (Farrell, 2021). In extreme cases, these challenges result in staff leaving the profession because they cannot cope (Farrell, 2009).

There is a growing body of evidence investigating ways to address NLT challenges. Areas of research focus include encouraging reflective practice (Farrell, 2016a), collegiate mentoring and support (Brannan & Bleistein, 2012; Mann & Tang, 2012), examining school systems (Shin, 2012) and promoting positive psychology (Hiver, 2016). The present study contributes to another series of investigations into how online teacher networks can be valuable sources of practical and emotional support, particularly for early career professionals. Studies in this area are typically situated within mainstream education (Bransford et al., 1999; Heider, 2005; Herrington et al., 2006), with much less research conducted within the field of English language teaching (Farrell, 2019).

The present study aimed to: a) survey the specific challenges faced by NLTs (N=42); and b) extend NLT training support beyond the post-certificate period by monitoring a small group of NLTs (N=10) as they engage with each other in a formal online network on Facebook, moderated by their tutors on the teacher training course. In doing so, important research gaps were addressed. Firstly, responding to calls to extend pre-service teacher education to in-service teacher support (Farrell, 2009; Hanson-Smith, 2006), the teacher educators decided to examine the value of a six-week online support group for NLTs, underpinned by the notion of professional communities of practice (CoPs) (Wenger, 1998). Secondly, the (teacher-educator) researchers adopted a top-down initiative to establish the CoP, in contrast to an informal network created by the teachers themselves (Lantz-Andersson et al., 2018). This approach has been overlooked in current literature. In this closed space, NLTs told their stories, shared experiences and exchanged knowledge while *in situ* as teachers, most of whom were on short-term, UK-based summer residential programmes with international students. Finally, to the best of our knowledge, studies have yet to examine the effectiveness of establishing

private online support networks for NLTs, immediately following pre-service training and while 'on the job'. Such studies are critical to our understanding of our graduates' lived experiences, not least so a research-informed approach to the content of teacher training programmes may better prepare NLTs for the realities of work, thereby reducing the effects of so-called transition shock (Farrell, 2021).

The following research questions guided the study:

1. What are the challenges NLTs face in their post-certificate teaching roles?
2. How do NLTs perceive the value of a post-certificate, private online CoP established by their teacher educators?

© Getty stock photography: Liubomyr Vorona



2

Literature review and theoretical framework

2.1 Novice teacher challenges

The research narrative on NLTs' post-training experiences is all too often associated with notions of abandonment and struggle (e.g. Farrell, 2019; Hiver, 2016; Kelly & Antonio, 2016). Leaving the relative safety net of a pre-service teacher training programme, with daily peer and tutor support on offer, can be a daunting step. This, taken together with the high demands and responsibilities of the teaching profession, often with little (if any) direct assistance with the post-training transition period, may explain why the early stages of in-service teaching are typically characterised as 'sink or swim' experiences, ultimately leading to concerning attrition rates in the sector. Johnson et al. (2014) also highlight that working with learners who cross linguistic and cultural boundaries, and/or finding work in international teaching contexts with inadequate support mechanisms, may be additional challenges specific to NLTs.

Investigating three cases of NLTs, Farrell (2016a) reported much of the 'shock' experienced related to challenges applying and furthering teaching knowledge, while developing a teacher identity in an established institutional culture. Feelings of isolation, stress and frustration are reportedly common in these early stages of teaching (Farrell, 2016a, 2019; Hiver, 2016; Hou, 2015). For instance, Hiver's (2016) novice L2 teachers' initial positivity about entering the teaching profession drastically changed in the first few months due to a perceived inability to tackle challenges out of their control, driven by a combination of fear and self-doubt. In addition to the emotional struggles teachers face, the widely reported absence of (or ineffective) institutional support offered to NLTs is also a known factor contributing to high levels of stress and anxiety (Farrell, 2016a).

Farrell (2006) suggests the historical inadequacy of fully preparing teachers for life in their new career stems from the 'highly situated, highly interpretative and idiosyncratic activity' (p. 211) of learning to teach. As discussed in the following sections, bridging the gap between pre-service training and service, by maintaining contact with NLTs to understand how they progress in those vulnerable first months, may be one solution to address both inadequate emotional or professional support mechanisms and the longstanding issue of high teacher attrition.

2.2. Communities of Practice (CoPs)

In educational settings, CoPs are a particularly useful theoretical framework to help identify and analyse teachers' knowledge and development. CoPs are 'groups of people who share a concern or passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly' (Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2015, p.1). There are three fundamental features of CoPs: a) a shared area of expertise such as English language teaching (domain); b) active engagement and knowledge exchange such as sharing classroom resources to help one another (community); and c) developing a shared knowledge base over time (practice) (Wenger, 1998). The community is built on the foundation of socially situated learning, the second theoretical aspect considered in this study (Wenger, 1998). Here, skills and knowledge are developed and driven by members asking questions, exchanging information, discussing ideas and problem solving for the benefit of both the individual and group collective. This approach to learning contrasts with physical, classroom-based activity, which is typically delivered out of context and with a one-size-fits-all, pre-determined content (Hanson-Smith, 2006).

Digital technologies are increasingly facilitating the shift of professional communities to online spaces. Issues such as time, accessibility and cost, which may have previously limited teacher engagement in face-to-face skills development, are overcome in virtual spaces (Prestridge, 2019). Among the positive outcomes of online communities, studies have reported high levels of collegial support, enhanced emotional engagement, and greater reflection on professional practices (Dille & Røkenes, 2021; Hou, 2015; Kelly & Antonio, 2016; Lantz-Andersson et al., 2018). Hou's (2015) study, for instance, showed engagement in an online CoP gradually led to an independence from the dominant supervisor-centred practice common in China, as the Chinese student teachers came to rely on each other as knowledge creators and sources of inspiration. Similarly, Kelly and Antonio (2016) found teachers supported one another in practical ways (e.g. resource-sharing) and emotional ways (e.g. advice-giving) in online communities. Nevertheless, the quality of peer support in CoPs (e.g. offering general encouragement and exchanging knowledge on a surface level) has also been criticised as superficial for its lack of reduced in-depth interactions, reflection and critical discussion (Dille & Røkenes, 2021; Lantz-Andersson et al., 2018). Since social media is now an established part of daily life and continues to further reshape opportunities for on-demand, peer-to-peer professional interaction, the following section explores the literature on social networking sites such as Facebook as collaborative spaces for teacher learning and support.

2.3 Social networking sites (SNS) for professional development

According to Prestridge (2019), in addition to recreational use of SNSs, teachers are increasingly turning to sites such as Facebook and WhatsApp for self-directed professional development. Teachers can select from a rich variety of interest-based groups which might better match their individual needs and teaching contexts. In SNS-enabled interaction, content is self-generated by users through collaboration and independent inquiry with like-minded others anytime, anywhere. In Liljekvist et al. (2021), SNS content was likened to face-to-face staffroom interactions which offer knowledge, advice and support on teaching issues. Unlike staffrooms, however, SNSs have the potential to offer extensive networking capabilities to build meaningful, collective knowledge on a broad scale,

with a range of colleagues in different teaching contexts. Dille and Røkenes (2021) and Hanson-Smith (2006) also highlighted the usefulness and ease of accessing ideas and activities which could be immediately applied. Importantly, the success of an online group, however, is highly dependent on the users' levels of willingness and effort to engage with the community.

Equally beneficial is the SNS potential for offering teachers social and emotional support (DeWert et al., 2003; Hou, 2015; Kelly & Antonio, 2016; Kinman et al., 2011). As described earlier, this is crucial for inexperienced NLTs as they balance the many challenges faced in a new teaching role. In fact, Hou (2015) found that emotional connectedness was as important as professional support offered in CoPs. DeWert et al. (2003) found that the emotional support offered by their online CoP was particularly useful in reducing feelings of loneliness and isolation, both of which have been linked with NLTs (Farrell, 2012).

3

Methodology

This paper reports on a two-phase research process. Phase 1 involved a questionnaire to survey the kinds of in-service challenges NLTs face. Phase 2 involved the setting up of an online CoP, followed by one-to-one interviews with the participants. This section will describe each phase in turn.

3.1 Phase 1: Questionnaires

To understand more about NLTs' difficulties, we constructed an online questionnaire (see Appendix A). This paper specifically reports on the classroom-based and broader professional challenges which covered 40 items. The questionnaire was distributed via online forums for language teachers and through teacher-educator networks to reach the graduates of their teacher training courses. In total, 43 respondents completed the survey (14 male, 29 female). Teachers were located in the UK (20), the rest of Europe (eight), Asia (seven), Middle East (three), Africa (three) and North America (two).

3.2. Phase 2: Participation in the online CoP and interviews

Following analysis of the Phase 1 questionnaire, we set up a private Facebook group to act as an online CoP or support group for ten NLTs from Phase 1. The teachers were in the first six months of their post-initial teaching qualification at the researchers' institution (9 females, 1 male; age range from 20 to 46, M age=29.5).

3.2.1 Participants

We used purposive sampling to recruit participants who met the requirements of the study. The two criteria were: i) NLTs who were planning to teach in the summer; ii) NLTs who had a Trinity CertTESOL level 5 pre-service training qualification. In terms of their educational background, four had a BA degree in TESOL, with one of those finishing an MA TESOL in applied linguistics, and the other two finishing translation degrees. Three teachers had completed the first two years of a BA TESOL degree.

The final three participants had completed a part-time Trinity CertTESOL course at the university, and these participants had non-teaching related degrees. Participants from within the same course (for example, the part-time Trinity CertTESOL course) knew each other but had never met those on the other courses, despite studying at the same institution.

In terms of previous teaching experience, Farrell (2012) considers a teacher to be at the novice stage within the first three years of their teaching career. However, as the questionnaire data results indicated that the first six months of teaching is the most stressful and difficult, we only recruited NLTs with less than six months of post-qualification classroom language teaching experience. The result was some differentiation in teaching experience. Four participants were starting their first ever teaching job. Three had previously taught for between one and six weeks in other summer schools, and three had more than six weeks of previous teaching experience. In addition, four of the participants had some partially relevant experience, for instance as one-to-one tutoring or supply teaching in non-language subjects in state schools.

While participating in the current study, eight of the NLTs were based at residential language summer schools across the UK for young learners aged 9–16. One participant was working as a kindergarten language teacher in Hong Kong. Another teacher was teaching an ESOL class to adult immigrant students in the northwest of England. Participants received payment for taking part in the study.

3.2.2 Procedure

Two online pilot studies preceded and informed the structure and organisation of the online CoP. We firstly conducted a ten-week pilot study using the alumni Facebook page from the University of Central Lancashire's BA and MA TESOL courses. The pilot study was conceptualised as a top-down continuous professional development (CPD) support.

Weekly posts on a CPD topic considered of interest to novice teachers were devised. We experimented with several different formats for the posts, including personal anecdotes followed by questions; critical incidents in which a problem was shared and advice sought (Farrell, 2006) and top-down teaching ideas or theories followed by a request for more ideas (see Appendix B for the CPD activities). Posts were complemented with professional articles or direction to online resources related to each topic. We analysed the engagement figures for each topic and sought verbal feedback from several novice teacher alumni and current students who read the posts. Two main features of this feedback informed the structure of the online CoP for the main study. We concluded that: a) relatively open Facebook groups, as the alumni page was, may act as a deterrent to participants revealing personal details of their jobs or lives, and that instead, for the main study, we would use a closed group. In addition, we found that: b) the more top-down the post in terms of tutors offering ideas to participants, the less overall engagement was observed. Instead, providing posts or prompts that asked participants to advise others (in the pilot, this was achieved through fictional critical incidents) appeared to increase engagement.

The second pilot involved 15 online interviews with active NLTs (from our TESOL alumni), which served to evaluate topics that a peer-supported NLT network might find beneficial, while also verifying the extent to which a peer-led CoP might promote greater participation. All interviewees highlighted at least one of three key aspects which they believed would be valuable aids in their early months of teaching. Firstly, practical support such as sharing 'videos or pictures for activities' or 'class management tips' were noted. All interviewees commented on their 'heavy workloads', 'long hours' and 'fast-paced' environment, leaving little time for classroom preparation or commitment to a top-down structured, in-service CPD course featuring prescribed tasks and reading. Secondly, the interviewees frequently cited the value of emotional support, particularly during the early months. Support was typically sought from family and friends, but 12 interviewees could imagine the advantages of an online space offering a different dimension of support from those 'in the same boat'. One representative suggestion was an online space to 'write down advice about what I've learned from that experience, share it and start some kind of discussion'. Another suggestion involved 'a place just to post that I've not had a good teaching day and people could offer support – sometimes that's just what you need' – a thought summarised by

another NLT as an 'online therapy session'. Finally, while the interviewees could envisage positive impacts from engagement in an online CoP, finding time to participate was also a key consideration. Interviewees imagined a format where NLTs could 'dip in and out in your own time', 'pop on when you've got 10 minutes' or 'while travelling [to or from work]'. Our decision to incorporate these three aspects also shaped the development of the final online CoP.

We also carefully considered the approach to tutor involvement, mentoring and advice in the online CoP during the developmental stage. Following reflection on the preceding pilot studies, we decided that the online CoP should focus less on a (tutor-directed) top-down approach and instead encourage active participation, support and advice between the NLT participants. To mitigate against potential low engagement, however, we started each week with a tutor-led post featuring a prompt question to initiate conversation (see Appendix C).

It is important to note that our approach involved some experimentation to find what worked best for our group of NLTs. In the middle of week one, for example, we initiated a top-down post that included an online teaching tool (see Appendix C) and asked the participants to share other tools. As observed in the pilot, while there was engagement from the participants and sharing of other tools, we felt that it did not foster the same sense of support and democratic participation as the posts that originated from the participants themselves.

We were also conscious of when, and indeed if, we should offer advice. A decision was made for each post about whether there was a genuine need for tutor input or whether other participants could provide ideas. In terms of timing, we felt that responding too early before the participants offered their own suggestions and support to each other may discourage participation. Therefore, we chose to give our advice only when the participants appeared dissatisfied with the peer support. This only happened one or two times throughout the six weeks. In sum, our aim was for the online CoP to be as non-hierarchical as possible. Instead, we wanted the participants to take control of the agenda and for the CoP to be self-generating and organic. In Dille and Røkenes' (2021) terms, we acted as self-generating and organic vertical facilitators and encouraged horizontal collaboration among participants. As a result, the amount of time spent monitoring and contributing to the online CoP by the researchers was minimal (approximately one hour per week).

The final development of the online CoP ran as follows. The teacher-educator researchers set up a private Facebook group. Facebook was selected for convenience of the user experience since an institutional Facebook page already existed, and participants already had Facebook accounts. Following Boyd and Ellison (2007), the online group was characterised as small (size), regional (location) and closed (privacy). We then wrote an introductory post outlining the aims and guidelines for the online CoP, as well as asking for an introductory message from the participants (Trust & Horrocks, 2019). Participants were encouraged to contribute ten posts a week for the six weeks' life cycle, with an emphasis on interactive posts. Suggested content included asking questions or advice, posting about worries or triumphs, and sharing materials. However, participants were asked to take ownership of the online CoP and were free to post content based on their needs and interests.

Following the six-week online CoP, semi-structured, one-to-one interviews (approximately one hour each) were carried out online via Microsoft Teams to investigate participants' thoughts and feelings about their teaching experiences and the online support group (see Appendix D). Interviews were recorded, transcripts were automatically generated, and identifying information, including names and companies, were redacted or anonymised.

3.2.3 Data analysis

To analyse the interview data, we used reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clark, 2006; 2021) involving familiarisation with the data, initial coding and theme development. We then refined our themes through an iterative approach of several cycles of co-coding between the researchers. We discussed the resulting codes and themes and constantly reviewed our understanding of the data. Following Muls et al. (2019), the researchers revisited the data to organise themes according to the research questions and to select representative quotes.

The size and privacy of the Facebook group in this study removed the need to address any major ethical concerns associated with conducting observations of pre-existing, open (public-facing) groups as seen in other literature (e.g. Kelly & Antonio, 2016; Muls et al., 2019). In the case of the present study, all ten participants consented to the study's overall aims and guidelines for participation (including an acceptable code of conduct) which was subsequently approved by the institutional ethics committee. Participants' names, as reported in this paper, are pseudonyms to protect identification.





4

Findings and discussion

4.1 Research question 1: What are the challenges NLTs face in their post-certificate teaching roles?

This first research question draws on the Phase 1 survey. Using a selection criterion from (Beltman et al., 2011), the respondents provided information on the biggest challenges they faced in their initial teaching posts. The criterion differentiated between challenges which were classroom- or school-based (Table 1) and those which were job-specific or related to the teaching profession more broadly (Table 2). Given space restrictions, discussions on each Table are limited to the most highly ranked challenges in the dataset.

Table 1 shows that the classroom challenges identified by Beltman et al.'s (2011) novice teachers are also common across the respondents in the present study. Further similarities are shown in the finding that classroom management and student behaviour are found to be the most demanding aspects of the job.

Criticisms of leadership staff (unsupportive/disorganised) rank as the second most challenging aspect in the data. From a mentorship perspective, this finding aligns with Brannan and Bleistein (2012) and DelliCarpini (2009), whose teachers felt let down by mentors who either failed to establish contact or did not engage on a regular basis. In terms of staff disorganisation, one of Farrell's (2016a) case study interviewees shared her 'exasperation, shock and frustration' (p.15) at the catalogue of administration errors, textbook delays and last-minute changes to class schedules at the start of her new teaching post. Interviewees also complained about rescheduled or non-existent staff meetings, which were an important but lost opportunity to address concerns.

Finally, a combination of challenges concerning materials and resources also ranked highly in the data (using materials prepared by others 30 per cent; lack of resources/equipment 28 per cent). Reporting on the former, Farrell (2016a) shared one teacher's resistance to working with pre-prepared materials, insisting the purpose of her training was to develop her own skills and style rather than following someone else's lead.

Table 1. Classroom- and school-based challenges for novice ELT teachers

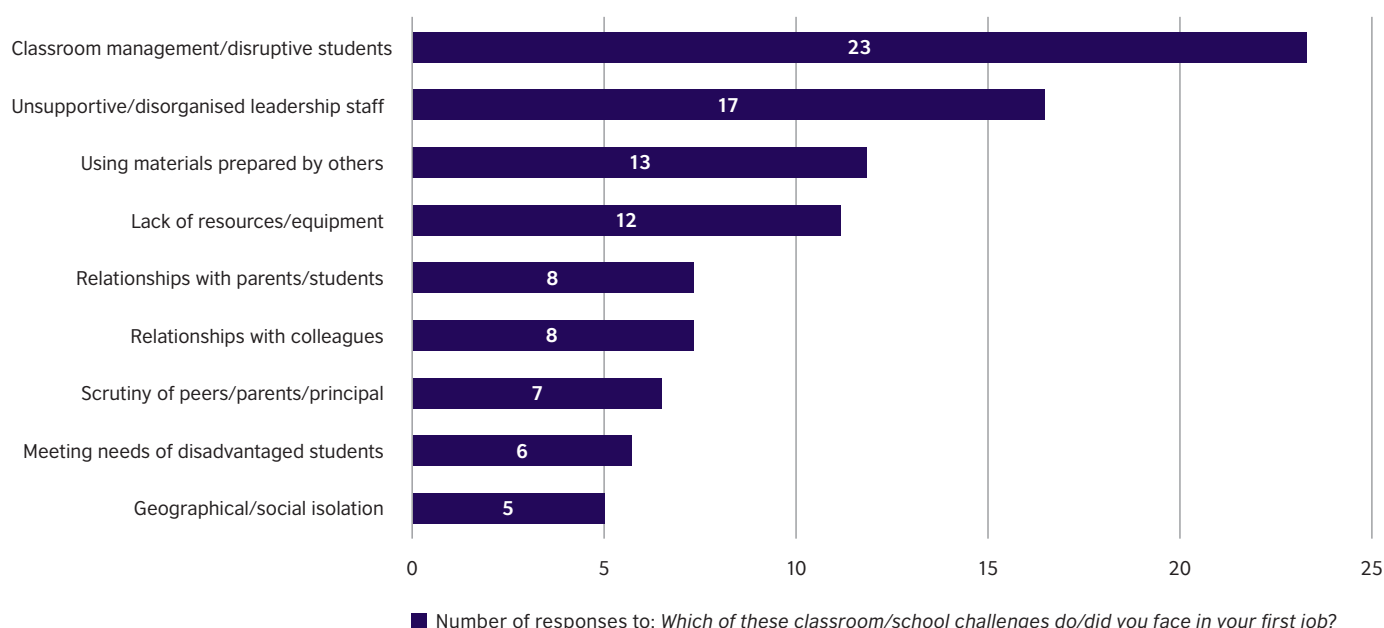
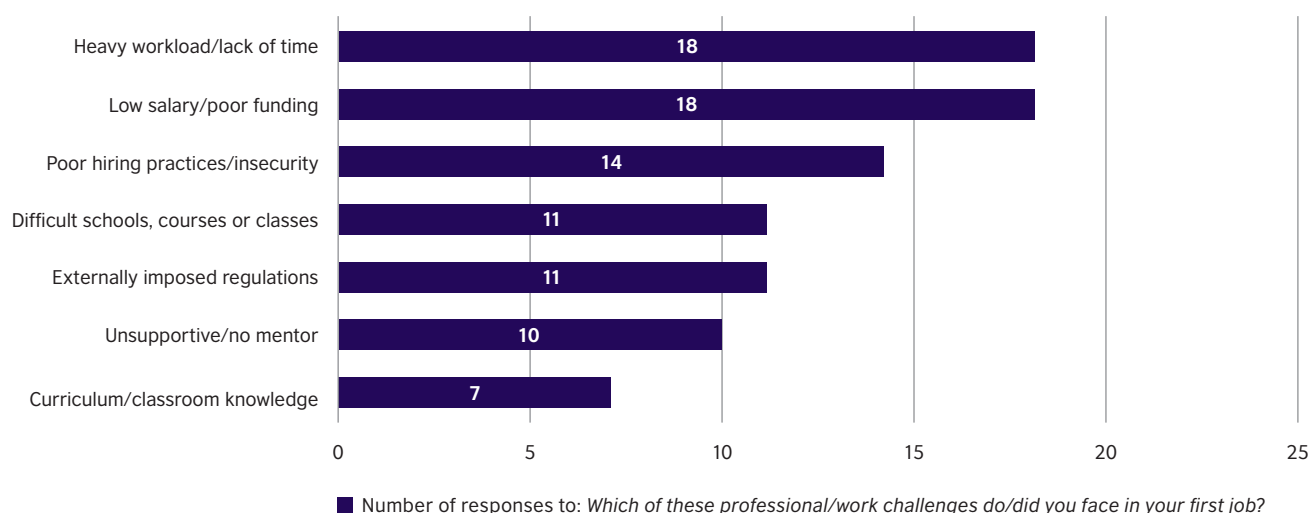


Table 2. Professional and work-specific challenges for novice ELT teachers



Respondents also reported on challenges specific to the job or teaching profession, as shown in Table 2.

Heavy workload and time pressures ranked joint top challenges in the dataset alongside financial concerns (low salary/poor funding). Both factors are likely linked if we consider the transient nature of the ELT industry, where temporary contracts and high staff turnover is common (Farrell, 2016a). These factors further link to ‘poor hiring practices and job insecurity’, also featuring as a high-ranking challenge in the data.

Of concern, is that the findings in Tables 1 and 2 have the potential to undermine or damage self-belief, especially at the early stages of a teaching career. This was illustrated in Hiver (2016) in a striking way. The NLTs recorded their levels of hope on a monthly basis which, in the early periods, showed ‘powerlessness’ to resolve many of the same issues noted in Tables 1 and 2, and led to ‘rapidly diminishing levels’ of positivity and hope. As part of the online survey for the present study, 79 per cent of participants agreed or strongly agreed that maintaining contact with their teacher educators through an online support group might be a valuable stopgap.

Data from the interviews supported the findings from the questionnaires. A number of the participants discussed classroom-based difficulties. It appeared that many of the difficulties involved taking on new groups of learners leading to classroom management challenges. Low-level groups with learners speaking lots of their first language, trying to teach groups with different levels and ages, and trying to motivate students to participate were all challenges that were mentioned as contributory factors.

Lily: *I think I was very confident going into it because I knew I can do what I was doing. I knew the syllabus. And then the first two weeks in summary were kind of hellish and it wasn't because of the materials. It wasn't because of the staff or anything like that. I just happened to have a wonderful bunch of kids that hated English. Hated everything. Any attempts to get them to do anything and it felt like, oh my God, I've spent years learning how to teach and all I've got to do is babysit. And then so after those hellish two weeks, I really was starting to think, why have I come back?*

For those teaching in residential summer language schools, in particular, this was compounded by the heavy workloads and frequent need to plan into the evening.

Violet: *I think I probably prepared too much, like more than was needed because I'd make PowerPoints for every lesson but just spend a bit too long on them and overthink tasks and every little thing that I was going to say, and it just it took about two or three hours to plan each lesson, which when you're doing two for every day, it can be up to six hours of lesson planning.*

Living and working in the residential summer language schools added to the challenges. Fortunately, for Violet, her family lived close by, allowing her a little space.

Jasmine: *It's constant. It's very full on and very stressful. You step out of your room, you're in teacher mode because the kids are there and you don't turn off teacher mode.*

Violet: *I was supposed to live residential for the job and I felt so uncomfortable in that first night and I didn't know how needed I was and everything. So we made the decision for me to go home and I was so glad every single day that I'd made that decision because not only does it allow you to get fully away from the school and recharge properly, rather than being there for the whole week straight, but it was also, just, yeah, nice to have my family and home comforts and everything.*

These challenges led to self-doubt, self-criticism and in a number of cases thoughts of quitting their job and the profession (see Farrell, 2016a for similar feelings from NLTs).

Violet: *Most of the time it made me question if I do want to be a language teacher and I've still got that a bit. I think I do still want to try at it because I'm aware that it was only one experience and one school and there's different things out there, but as a whole it has made me hesitant ... maybe this isn't the path that I want to take.*

Hyacinth: *I was just very mentally drained and my class wasn't great. On week five, I was contemplating if I was cut out to be a teacher.*

Bryony: *Like, when I hit the very, very lows, sometimes it felt like the end of the world to me ... It was really, it was really hard for me to get kind of back up and back on the track.*

However, despite these challenges and, in some cases, resulting doubts about remaining in the teaching profession, all participants also mentioned aspects of the job that they really enjoyed (79 per cent of respondents from the questionnaire also reported enjoying their first teaching job). This underlines the importance of helping NLTs navigate their way through these difficult first few months of teaching till they reach a place where they can thrive in their chosen careers (see also Hiver (2016) for teacher turning points).

Holly: *I just remember this Maria [a student], because she didn't go to school in her country. She couldn't speak English. And when she achieved just a little bit, she liked that. I can't say that I taught her a lot. But I did it and she learned those things and well, I enjoyed that.*

Jasmine: *There are definitely a few students that stand out in my mind ... they came into my class at the beginning of the week and they were very shy. They didn't contribute to answers very much but then by the end of the week they were very involved and made friends.*

One way that NLTs receive support is through academic leadership and mentoring. For some of the participants, having very supportive academic leadership helped with (although did not eradicate) the difficulties they were facing.

Violet: *So the first thing that comes to my mind is definitely my course director. She was just so sweet and lovely and just helpful all the time ... I feel like normally in a professional environment you might just put on a brave face and be saying, oh, yeah, it's fine. But she just made me feel like I could be honest.*

Bryony: *So my course director, she was genuine, an absolute angel. She was amazing. There was one class in the last week that had quite a few disruptive students. And I remember she came into my lesson to observe and she gave me a lot of good feedback.*

Daisy: *The staff for us were really, really supportive, which I was quite nervous about because when you're walking in as a foreign teacher, you don't know how you're going to be perceived.*

On the other hand, for others, the challenges they faced were exacerbated and perhaps even caused by unsupportive or non-existent academic support.

Rose: *It was very chaotic ...I would say maybe 10 per cent of it is because it's my first teaching job, like teaching summer school as well. But the rest of the 90 per cent was because of the company, they were very disorganised. I did not see my manager, the teaching side and [did] not see her at all. I saw her maybe for 5 minutes in two weeks.*

The support of line managers, mentors, senior colleagues and other colleagues can make a huge difference in a NLT's ability to cope with the challenges that they face (Beltman et al., 2011). Some NLTs (48 per cent of the questionnaire respondents) feel supported in their first job. For others, if they are to receive support, it must come from other sources. In the next section, we will turn our attention to the participants' perceptions of one such potential source of support: an online CoP. The next section considers the NLTs' reflections of their experience in this online CoP.

4.2 Research question 2: How do NLTs perceive the value of a post-cert, closed, online CoP established by teacher educators?

This section, based on the interviews with the ten participants in the online CoP, is organised into three main areas: practical support, tutor and NLT involvement, and the size of the online CoP.

4.2.1 Emotional and social support

One of the primary aims of the online CoP was to encourage social and emotional support within the online group membership. According to Lantz-Andersson et al. (2018), the supportive qualities of online communities are an important stand-out feature. Participants talked about several different

benefits of being part of an online CoP that appeared to help with problems typically faced by NLTs. One aspect of emotional and social support that impressed almost all the participants was how everyone being a NLT with similar issues and worries helped combat the feeling of isolation (Farrell, 2012; Kelly & Antonio, 2016). Holly's comment summarises the feelings of many participants:

Holly: *I understand that even if I fail, and I feel depressed after a bad lesson, I'm not the only teacher with this problem. And it's OK to feel like that ... But even just people saying like, oh, I'm having the same thing with my class and not offering any constructive advice, but just hear that they're having the same issues, like, that was really nice emotionally to just not feel as alone.*

The emotional support provided by the online CoP helped when some participants were feeling down.

Bryony: *It really did help me get back up sometimes and it was nice [to] have a place to go to when I was struggling and I knew there were people kind of in the same situation. Yeah, like it's just nice. Nice knowing they have a community of similar experiences.*

Jasmine: *We were all there to support each other, even just keep our own mental health in a good place.*

It is possible that the small-scale nature of the CoP (ten participants) might also have encouraged the sharing of intimate critical incidents, since research suggests participants are typically more reticent to ask for support in large, open groups (e.g. Clarà et al., 2017; Kelly & Antonio, 2016). This feeling of being in it together, supporting each other through tough times, seemed to be enhanced by the cross-organisational nature of the online CoP, at least for Lily. At the same time, she also discussed how a work-based CoP between NLTs in her organisation led to negative discourse – an unfortunate but common negative outcome of SNSs identified elsewhere (Johnson, 2001).

Lily: *In that kind of group [work-based] chat that we had, it was, we were just, it was almost like a competition to like what was me, who has it worse, who's suffering more. But when there's other people from other areas, you realise it's not, it's not really competition. You are genuinely there to make sure each other are OK, like I'm not asking how you are just to compare how many times you've cried over your lesson plan. I'm asking because I care.*

Another area of positive emotional support was the sharing and reading of positive news and successes. Hanson-Smith (2006) describes this activity as 'cheerleading' (p. 309), adding that 'recognition by one's peers is a powerful group cement' (p. 309). Violet mentioned that she felt like bringing up her successes would 'clog up' the workplace meetings, but that writing about it in the online CoP helped prolong the feeling.

Violet: *This nice thing has happened today and it just feels so nice to share and kind of live in that moment for a bit longer. It makes it a bit more real. And like, yeah, rather than it just happening and forgetting about it to be able to share. It's really nice.*

Holly, Violet and Rose all talked about how beneficial it was to read about other members' successes from a practical (Violet), emotional (Holly) and social (Rose) point of view.

Violet: *I don't know how helpful it was [for others to read about my successes], but it was actually really helpful to see other people's successes. And again, because I related to them so much thinking like, oh, I could do that. I could try that or this might work with my class and seeing how things work for them after certain amounts of time.*

Holly: *I enjoyed it so much when people posted something positive, some achievements. I wanted to support them.*

Rose: *[I liked that we were] Supporting each other and sharing fun moments.*

In contrast, Hyacinth viewed the sharing of successes less important than sharing practical teaching ideas: *Sharing highs is like not the main thing, but it's still quite nice to see what other people have achieved.*

None of the participants mentioned that the sharing of small successes by others made them feel worse about their own situations. This was perhaps helped by the general tone of the online CoP, in which they were all in it together and there to help each other through the difficult few weeks of teaching. Sites such as Facebook are known to easily facilitate the social research idea of *reciprocity*, meaning if members of a group experience extrinsic benefits such as knowledge sharing, or intrinsic benefits such as self-satisfaction, they are more likely to develop a more positive attitude towards collaboration (Kelly & Antonio, 2016).

Poppy and Lily noted how the posting of visuals such as photos enhanced and sustained their engagement in the community.

Poppy: *You just see the picture and you say, oh, I know it's ... I know [X] or someone. [It's] so nice to see her because last week she wrote that she struggled. It's so nice to see her The picture of ducks that she saw in the park. So that was a nice feeling that I think helped me go into the last weeks of the research.*

Lily: *I think for me I'm quite, quite a visual person, so I did kind of lean more towards the post where people had shown what they've been up to or shown what they were doing. So I found that a bit more easy to kind of engage and chat with than just kind of walls of text.*

The longer the online support group went on, the more the participants, or at least those who fully engaged in the process, began to care for and appreciate the other members of the group. These positive feelings also seemed to contribute to sustained motivation to participate. Lily commented on her growing feelings of 'social responsibility' to support the group as it evolved. Palloff and Pratt (1999) refer to this stage of the community life cycle as the 'intimacy and work phase' where closer relations form over time, giving rise to 'mutual accountability' (Wenger, 1998). In

turn, the 'progressive construction of a trustful environment' (Clarà et al., 2017) appeared to form as participants became more willing to open up about their experiences. Overlaps with literature on the benefits of online support groups more generally which foster emotional and social support can also be made (e.g. Barak et al., 2008; see also Lave (1991) for an early study into a CoP built around an alcoholics anonymous support group).

Poppy: But then it was like a snowball effect. You get to meet people. People start sharing not only their professional issues, but also their pictures from their days off and some successes of their students and all of a sudden these random people on the Internet in the same group, they become real people and you become more emotionally invested in them and you think, oh OK, so if they're sharing this like I may as well share something.

As mentioned in the previous section, most of the NLTs in this study experienced a number of negative emotions, ranging from isolation, stress, feelings of inadequacy and tiredness. When viewed through the lens of support groups more broadly, the social and emotional support provided by this online CoP becomes just as valuable, if not more so, than any practical teaching skill development (Bell-Robertson, 2011), particularly given that 'the profession that eats its young' (Wong, 2002; see also Farrell, 2016b) has a troublingly high percentage of NLTs quitting. Almost a quarter of novice teachers in general education in the United States drop out within the first two years of teaching (Ingersoll & Smith, 2003). In the current study, 30 per cent of questionnaire respondents considered quitting the profession in their first teaching job.

Another aspect of social support discussed by a number of participants was the need for and appreciation of a safe, non-judgmental space. This was evident in Holly's comments as she contrasted the closed tutor-moderated group with more general online groups. She mentioned that she felt 'protected' in the group, with not only the level of trustworthiness of any advice given as everyone was coming from the same training background, but also knowing that, as the group was moderated by tutors, there would be a level of professionalism in responses between group members.

Holly: And we understand that we were taught the same things. So when I share my ideas, I know people will understand. The same with me. If I ask for advice, I know I ask professionals for advice. [On the internet] ... you might get the same support, but at the same time you might get more hatred.

Hyacinth mentioned the safety of knowing that she could speak her mind and share her worries without fear of it going further than the online group. Linked to aspects of trust and safety, Jasmine described how 'the sense of anonymity' of the current study's online CoP compared to the WhatsApp group among her colleagues, allowed her to lower her 'inhibitions' and open up more about her worries. In Hou (2015), teachers also reported the benefits of the 'subtle yet comfortable psychological distance and invisibility' of the online community (p. 12) which allowed them to share embarrassing or awkward professional encounters. By contrast, fear of criticism or judgement can deter NLTs from asking for help from colleagues and line managers, especially for aspects of the profession that the NLT feels they 'should' know (Hertzog, 2002). This may be particularly heightened for those with unsupportive or disorganised leadership staff, or those engaging in larger, open online groups where interaction may be intentionally low to avoid negative judgements (Clarà et al., 2017).

Safety, in terms of the comfort of the familiar in the face of new daunting challenges, was brought up by both Lily and Basil. For Lily, the soft transition was appreciated.

Lily: And for me it was like almost continuing university and I'm quite comfortable in this university setting of having group chats with all the students and chatting to other people. But going into the world and doing like kind of like a big girl job, if you will, with people that I don't know. It's quite nice to have that kind of familiarity.

Basil echoed Lily's worry about moving into the unknown with his new job, adding that he appreciated the reassurance that comes with being with a group of university-trained NLTs.

Basil: *Because it's nice to be in a community of people who've got something in common, even if the only thing that we've got in common is we're students at the same university and we're recently, you know, qualified to teach, we're going off into an alien environment. You know, you've no idea what your boss is going to be like, what your colleagues are going to be like. You're wet behind the ears, you know. So it's good to have people to talk to.*

The appreciation that communities of practice should be safe, supportive spaces has been confirmed by many previous studies (e.g. Baker & Beames, 2016; Li et al., 2009; Vangrieken et al., 2017). The added safety of a tutor-moderated group populated with other students from the same (in this case university) pre-service training courses may be particularly beneficial for NLTs, as tutors can set the ground rules for communication between members, ensuring a professional, supportive environment. Tutors may also be able to encourage more participation in the online CoP, organising discussions in a somewhat similar way to what NLTs are used to, thus providing a soft-transition or bridge between the safety of the previous pre-service training life and the potentially scary new life of a teacher.

In terms of emotional self-support, the online CoP had an added advantage of providing opportunities for self-reflection. Concerning the writing of posts in an online group, Lantz-Andersson et al. (2018) noted that the process itself stimulated forms of reflection and self-analysis not evident in face-to-face meetings. Bryony went through this process of gathering her thoughts to write a post.

Bryony: *Cause, when you are going through like a lot of those and you are just focusing on the negatives, there's just so many things that are going through your head. There's just so many things that are going through my head that I was quite hard for me to just put [it] down [in writing]. But when I did, I would kind of revise it and then I decided to post it.*

The process of writing posts and replies on the online CoP forced Lily to reflect on her mental state while for Jasmine, the act of writing about problems was therapeutic.

Lily: *[The] Facebook group reminded me not to be so negative and self-critical. But then when I'd have the moment to sit and write it, I would, I'd think, Oh my God, everything I've got to say is so critical. So it made me almost not want to post as much because I was kind of search for something positive today or something that was less self-hate.*

Jasmine: *It was cathartic to write about problems and things I was experiencing, or even just to share highs.*

For Bryony, the sharing of reflection skills 'as a kind of summarising of experience' as she called it, was also appreciated. When another member of the online CoP (Violet) chose to write a reflective piece at the end of the study discussing things that she had learned about herself, Bryony and Jasmine were motivated to post their own reflections too. Reflection and CoPs are a much-studied area (Allard et al., 2007; Daniel et al., 2013; Enfield & Stasz, 2011; Yang, 2009). Writing in an online CoP is itself a reflective action, as the writer needs to think, organise thoughts and put them into words that others will understand (Farrell, 2019). The type of emotional reflection mentioned by the participants here (see also Zembylas, 2014), as opposed to a more external, problem-solving form of reflection (Farrell, 2022), may be particularly useful in the early stages of a NLT's career, when negative feelings, such as frustration, anger and boredom, can be common (Farrell, 2022).

4.2.2 Practical teaching support

The theme of practical teaching support was another main benefit of this online CoP mentioned by nearly all participants. Perhaps helped by the participants' prior history with each other from their pre-service training programmes, and that the CoP seemed to operate on a basis of trust and collegiality, requests for help with teaching ideas and resources were rich and frequent in number. This contrasts with the findings in Kelly and Antonio (2016), who examined teacher support in large, public-facing groups which,

they hypothesised, limited participant knowledge sharing in this way due to a lack of privacy and changing user base. Violet pointed out that despite having excellent support from her line manager, and a work-based WhatsApp group among teaching staff, she found the online CoP allowed her to ask practical teaching questions. She mentioned that her work-based WhatsApp group was generally for job and organisational questions, such as syllabus and company policies.

Violet: However, I never asked general teaching questions on there (e.g. what to do when students finish an activity early, or aren't listening, etc.). This was largely because the chat didn't seem to be for the purpose of casual questions like this ... I had a feeling of not wanting to bother them with anything unnecessary ... This was where the support group was a really nice place to turn to. It was a place specifically meant for those kind of questions, and so I felt I could ask them, without feeling like I was clogging people's messages up, or adding to anyone's workload.

Taking the simile of online CoP as staffroom interaction (Liljekvist et al., 2021), Violet's comment suggests that, due to its asynchrony and despite how busy NLTs are, the online CoP at its best may be similar to those rare quiet moments in the staffroom when teachers are not rushing madly to prepare their next lessons and instead can spare a few minutes to impart advice and offer support and encouragement.

Having the kind of supportive atmosphere to be able to ask for practical advice was important for Rose. Safety and trust are considered crucial elements for developing a successful learning environment (e.g. Hanson-Smith, 2006; Johnson, 2001).

Rose: When I ask[ed] questions, I had the feeling that they wouldn't be laughing at me because they're so experienced. They would probably feel the same.

Online CoPs are known for enabling teachers to drive their own learning and knowledge which meets their specific needs (Trust & Horrocks, 2019). With no imposed structure or curriculum, our NLTs were given 'voice and choice' (Trust & Horrocks, 2019) to direct their own learning, which had a positive impact. Participants reported appreciating receiving practical tips and advice on a range of techniques, such as classroom management for young learners (Hyacinth, Rose), games, activities and warmers (Basil, Rose), AI (Hyacinth). They knew that if a problem or question was raised, the community would respond quickly. This 'just-in-time knowledge building', using Hanson-Smith's (2006, p. 304) terms, is considered a significant feature of online communities and was particularly useful in this group due to the limited time available for lesson planning.

Both Bryony and Violet stated that they looked for ideas and practical teaching support from a number of different sources, and that the online support group added to and reinforced, rather than replaced, the advice gained from other sources.

Violet: If my course director had said something, I'm obviously going to know that that's good and helpful advice. But if it was again said on the group chat, hearing it said again makes you realise, oh, maybe that really will be helpful. And even though I'm scared to do it, I should do it.

Asking for and receiving practical advice was not always, however, trouble-free. One of the problems with an asynchronous online CoP, such as Facebook for NLTs working in a fast-paced environment such as residential summer schools, is that by the time the post had been replied to (often several days), the immediate problem had been resolved.

Jasmine: Whereas the kind of issues and things that I think most of us were facing, if we wrote it on Monday, by the time Friday had come, and maybe two or three people had replied to it, it was already in the past. It was no longer an issue, quite a lot of the time.

The online CoP allowed members to learn how things were done in different organisations and centres. Basil discussed how he appreciated this feature of the online CoP.

Basil: *It was inspiring to read what other people were doing, and also to exchange information, like, because you might assume that every summer school for the same company like [company name] is going to be the same. But it depends on, like, how they've set up that summer school. Like, when I explain that sometimes we did three meetings a day, one of the others, I can't remember who it was, said, 'Oh, that sounds nothing like my [company name] experience. We have a meeting that is maximum 10 minutes long in the morning and we just say, has anybody got any issues?'*

Sharing diverse experiences and contrasting approaches may help NLTs reflect on and then adapt to challenging situations in their own workplaces. There may be something strangely comforting to know that a local difficulty in your own workplace is due to specific line managers' practices rather than organisation or industry-wide practices. This sentiment was also captured in Hou (2015). As with the NLTs in the present study, the online CoP exposed teachers to a variety of practices which broadened their view of different teaching environments. This was a key contributor to reducing nervousness and anxiety about handling other challenging situations in the future.

4.2.3 Tutor contributions

The participants discussed the benefits and potential drawbacks of tutor involvement in the online CoP. Firstly, some participants appreciated that the tutors posted weekly prompts to get conversations going and also contributed to some of the discussions.

Jasmine: *It was nice you guys replied. Nice seeing positive input from both of you. You made us feel a bit more reassured in our suggestions because in we're all still novices.*

Lily: *You or Nicola giving us prompts or reminders was nice. I think if there was a kind of admin or moderator that can do a whole group check in once a week, that would be nice.*

Several participants suggested that a little more involvement from the tutors would have been appreciated.

Bryony: *I would feel just that little bit of extra support because, because yeah, you guys have the most experience out of all of us.*

However, some also acknowledged the potential danger of tutors getting too involved and thus taking over the novice-teacher-led dynamic of the online CoP.

Violet: *Yeah, because I feel like the other newbie teachers would then feel less [likely to] respond if they knew that you [the tutors] were to respond.*

Hyacinth: *Now I don't know 'cause, I think 'cause we're novice teachers. We're all in the situation that we can communicate with each other. I think the support you've given us is just the right amount that we needed. So I think if you're there giving advice, it kind of sort of takes away the advice that, like, other people might want to give. It doesn't give them the opportunity to give their ideas because it might get [overshadowed]. I think the way you start off the conversation, that's like the great amount of support that started off the whole thing. And every now and then you did reply to comments and stuff like that, which I think was great, but I think any more support than that would have been ... like putting yourself into the research rather than researching us.*

One interesting comment from Jasmine, unforeseen by the tutors, highlights how, as far as she was concerned, the online CoP, and the roles that the tutor moderators played within it, were in some way an extension of the roles played in the university courses that they had come from.

Jasmine: *You and Nicola both commented on certain posts, but not all of them. Which may have made some people, not feel down but you, you didn't post on my post. You didn't comment on my post kind of thing. I don't know whether others would feel that way.*

It is important that teacher educators setting up an online CoP for NLTs recognise that, initially, tutor roles will be shaped by power dynamics from the previous course. For tutors, balancing expert help and mentorship with encouraging NLTs to take ownership of the CoP can be challenging. A tutor-moderated CoP offers access to expert skills and experience (Wenger, 1998), such as lesson ideas, reassurance and reminders of best practices. However, excessive tutor involvement may hinder peer relationships, peer-to-peer learning, and belonging (Johnson, 2001). Reducing the tutor's role to facilitator/observer or co-participant (Graves, 1992) can promote confidence in sharing problems, brainstorming and offering support (Walker et al., 2020). Achieving the right balance may involve negotiating with CoP members and tutor-moderators (DePalma & Teague, 2008) and understanding that CoP relationships are inherently dynamic, necessitating a trial-and-error approach to find the optimal balance.

The role of leadership and hierarchies in CoPs has been widely discussed (e.g. DePalma & Teague, 2008; Wenger, 1998). Wenger (1998), for example, distinguished between different forms of internal leadership roles, including members who provide inspirational, interpersonal and cutting-edge leadership. Encouraging CoP members to take on more of these roles may result from reducing the amount of tutor input. Indeed, although specific roles were not assigned in the present study, some of the slightly more experienced NLTs naturally gravitated towards internal leadership in the form of expert-apprentice roles (Johnson, 2001). This kind of membership evolution is also a known factor for helping a CoP to thrive (Trust & Horrocks, 2019). Providing help to others more than asking for help themselves was both enjoyable and empowering for the participants, as described by Basil and Lily.

Basil: I also have prior teaching experience, and I knew that I'd be able to contribute to this because I can imagine if some of them are maybe on their own for the first time and they're only young, they're going to feel quite, you know, intimidated, maybe nervous, apprehensive.

Lily: Hmm, I think I personally enjoyed responding to other people a bit more 'cause I felt like I had more to say.

4.2.4 NLT involvement

Although our findings have illustrated the participants were self-driven to participate in the online CoP for the most part, there were several factors that at times inhibited their involvement including time and energy, personality, emotional state and a lack of need. By far the most commonly discussed factor that inhibited involvement was, perhaps unsurprisingly, a lack of 'time, energy' and having heavy workloads (Poppy). Participants reported squeezing in time to participate in the online CoP after long days of teaching and planning, which limited their ability to participate in the precious spare moments left to them.

Hyacinth: It was like this due to the lack of time: a lot of the teachers had, it was hard to read through and give the feedback that other teachers might need, the support they need, and that was time consuming in itself.

Basil: I was eager to go on every couple of days. I mean, there were a couple of days when I just didn't have the time to do it. And especially the only day off you didn't really want to spend it on Facebook, you know?

Jasmine talked about how contributing posts and advice to the online CoP took more time than anticipated: *I was careful about what and how I wrote the posts. It wasn't like making a normal post on Facebook.*

Violet found that being a member of the online CoP brought extra responsibilities: *I was [viewing] that group chat as a bit of a responsibility as well. I would just be so tired in my times that I wasn't supposed to be teaching or supposed to be lesson planning that I just didn't want to do anything else TESOL-related.*

Hyacinth: When I'd finish teaching, I [was] quite tired. I just want[ed] to sort of do my own thing. So either I sat in my room, maybe watch something, read a book, or work on my dissertations and my aim at that point wasn't really to look on Facebook to respond or post anything unless I necessarily and absolutely needed to.

This raises the question as to whether participants would have contributed to and participated in the CoP if they had not been part of a paid research study. Several of the participants suggested that they might not have posted as often and may even have been reluctant to join in the first place. However, with the benefit of hindsight after a few weeks of bonding, they appreciated the value of the online CoP. If tutors decide to set up and moderate online CoPs for their NLTs, finding ways to encourage participation without adding too much to levels of tiredness, stress and workload is of paramount importance (see also Trust and Horrocks (2019) for suggestions on designing communities of practice).

Another factor that inhibited involvement was participants' emotional states. When some participants were feeling particularly down and arguably needed help and support the most, there was a tendency not to want to ask for help or take on board the advice and support that was offered.

Lily: *I think if it had been last year, I don't think I would have felt comfortable [posting on FB] because I felt so overwhelmed and I had so little time to even kind of reflect on anything myself, let alone try and formulate it in a group and post it.*

Bryony: *If I have, like, those really, really low lows, it was just really hard to focus on the very nice and positive things that were writing because I was just so focused on the negatives and the in the moment.*

Holly: *When I just started teaching and I had this discipline problem, I did mention it, but I didn't ask for advice. Things go a bit not as I had expected at work. And I just wanted to feel, you know, like I don't want to talk to anyone.*

This is another big challenge for those wishing to set up online CoPs for NLTs. Perhaps the answer lies less in trying to encourage more participation when feeling down, and instead accepting that, like Holly, participants who are feeling particularly low may take on the still-helpful role of lurker where 'legitimate peripheral participation' (Wenger, 1998) still takes place.

Holly: *While I was down, people continued sharing, and what I did, I just kept reading [about] what was going on in their lives.*

Finally, the feeling of getting all the support needed elsewhere, either at various points through the study or in total was expressed by several participants. Daisy reported that she 'got lucky' with her first job placement, as she received excellent support from both senior colleagues at her school and colleagues she shared a flat with. Daisy thought that perhaps her 'independent' personality, openness to 'constructive criticism' and willingness to ask for help from those around her led to a feeling of satisfaction and therefore, 'less likely to reach out online'. Hyacinth, while finding the support group more useful than Daisy, still found that, 'some weeks I didn't feel the need to post'.

Online CoPs are unlikely to appeal to everyone, with combinations of personality, levels of support in their teaching contexts, level of experience and teaching difficulties all playing a role in how much NLTs wish or feel able to participate. In the questionnaire in Phase 1 reported above, while 79 per cent of respondents reported agreeing or strongly agreeing with the statement about benefiting from an online CoP, nine per cent either disagreed or strongly disagreed.

4.2.5 Size of the online CoP

Participants were asked about the ideal size of an online CoP. Most were aware of the inherent tension between having a large number of participants in the group and therefore having a greater number of posts to read and engage with, thus reducing the pressure on individuals to regularly post on the one hand, and having a smaller group with a greater sense of community, safety and individual support on the other. Literature indicates that the privacy and size of online groups impacts levels of collegial support, interaction and trust (Clarà et al., 2017; Lin et al., 2018).

Violet: *For more activity it would be good to have more people, but I'd say for us I don't know how many people were originally in that chat, but I feel like there were about five or six of us that regularly used it and I think any more people than that, it would feel like less of a close network ... Just that it would be very different experiences if you had about 100 then I feel like I would feel less pressure as an individual to keep up with every single message because I think it would be impossible. So it would be less pressuring. So you might go on occasionally and it might feel nicer in that way. But I think for me personally, I would feel less connected to the people and therefore less supported and less likely to actually use it.*

Hyacinth: *Having a bigger support group would be more helpful because you'd have more people posting, more people responding, so it's not limited to the [smaller group]. I feel like 20 perhaps. I think anything more things will get lost, but [if] it was 20, you'll have a lot more posts and I think more people to answer and respond to.*

Lily: *I can't even remember how many people were in this one, but it seemed that there was like kind of five or six of us that were quite responsive. So I think around 10, I think 20 might be too much, so like 10 to 15 could be nice. And I suppose it really depends how active people are and how much is being posted.*

Group size and the tension between community versus ideas and pressure to post is an area that teacher educators thinking of setting up an online CoP must consider. There will be logistical constraints to the size of the group, including the number of candidates graduating from the pre-service training course, but teacher educators could, as in the current study, combine cohorts of different courses, or even different course providers. Alternatively, Violet suggested an idea to make the most of different size groups by having a larger

group combining all cohorts that deals with the more practical teaching side of things, and then smaller sub-groups, perhaps consisting of the existing cohort, for the more social and supportive functions of an online CoP.

4.3 Summary of findings

In summary, the current study found evidence to support the findings in previous studies (Beltman et al., 2011; Farrell, 2012) that novice language teachers struggle in the first months of teaching in their first language teaching jobs. Both the questionnaire data and data from the interviews highlighted challenges including both classroom management, such as discipline and dealing with different levels in the same class, and more work-based challenges including heavy workloads, leaving limited time for lesson preparation, and unsupportive management. This appeared to be particularly acute for those working in residential summer schools.

Regarding the effectiveness of the online CoP, the interviews discussed emotional and social support, practical teaching ideas and tutor and NLT involvement. In terms of emotional and social support, the online CoP helped develop a safe, non-judgmental space in which to share worries and mini-triumphs, leading to a sense of community that appeared to, for some, reduce the feelings of isolation and despair. As a safe space, it also allowed for the sharing of practical teaching ideas in a way that even many of those with supportive, helpful academic leadership found useful.

Evidence from the data suggests that there may be additional benefits to tutor-moderated online CoPs above and beyond those offered by either work-based online CoPs, informal online CoPs between classmates, or large-scale open online CoPs. Benefits may include the increased likelihood of the development of a safe space, through maintaining professional standards and moderating online CoP behaviour and through providing a 'soft bridge' or continuation from teacher-education practices; and, if moderated sensitively, offering both the added sense of security and skill development that comes with expert mentorship, while maintaining novice-teacher ownership of the online CoP.

Issues regarding the right balance between tutor involvement and democratic novice-teacher-led groups, and group size to maximise the feelings of community while reducing the amount of pressure to post were discussed, so that tutor-moderated online CoPs may help NLTs in their first jobs rather than hinder them further.



5

Limitations and future research

This study was a small-scale piece of research. Our aim was not to make broad generalisations but rather to explore the lived experiences of this particular group of NLTs. Different individuals (both NLTs and tutors), with different dynamics (between NLTs in the online CoP and between NLTs and tutors), having studied in different institutions (e.g. university or private language school) and working in different organisations may well have different experiences of online tutor-moderated CoPs. The small-scale nature of the study did, however, allow for a more careful consideration of this group's transition experiences. As mentioned, several of the participants worked at the same location, so this too may have affected their interactions. Furthermore, the participants in this study were all those who had found work either immediately following the end of the pre-service training course or during the summer holidays in the middle of their degree courses. It could be argued, therefore, that this group were go-getters and may not be representative of most pre-service training graduates. While the payment was discussed by participants, with most saying that after the initial week payment was no longer a factor motivating their involvement, it is still an aspect that may have contributed to engagement and participation.

This study opens several potential avenues of further research. One possibility is to further investigate what makes an online CoP successful by repeating the study while modifying some of the variables (tutor involvement, size of the group, having the same or different teaching contexts, online platform – Discord, WhatsApp). Next, as this study consisted of only six weeks of participation in an online CoP, it would be interesting to extend this study, returning to interview participants after six months, a year and three years. This might be particularly interesting given the very fragmented, transient nature of the first few months post-cert that many NLTs now encounter, with short-term contracts and the increase in online teaching. A further avenue of potential investigation is to look more at NLTs' beliefs and actions through, for example, looking at peer support on the online CoP, factors that affect the 'buy-in' or initial engagement on the online CoP, teacher efficacy, resilience or how they feel their teacher education course prepared them for the first job. Another potential area of study is to investigate online CoPs through the lens of online wellbeing support groups, as it could be argued that the first few months are more about surviving than flourishing. Finally, given the contrasting experiences of academic support that our participants received, a study that specifically investigates academic leadership in residential summer language schools and the support they provide for NLTs may contribute to an improved understanding of how to help NLTs in these kinds of specific teaching contexts.

6

Recommendations

The relative success of this small-scale effort is sufficiently encouraging to consider establishing a local, tutor-moderated online CoP within our pre-service training programme, which would then carry over into in-service life (Hanson-Smith, 2006). Hyacinth suggested that an online CoP would be a useful feature of the pre-service Trinity CertTESOL course, which might increase the likelihood of prolonged and sustained engagement beyond the training period. Indeed, most participants suggested that it was this initial engagement with the online CoP that they envisioned being difficult without the incentive of payment. Suggestions from the participants to increase 'buy-in' to an online CoP included adding a face-to-face meeting before teaching begins to help participants get to know each other and put names to faces; discussing on the teacher education course the challenges that NLTs face; and asking participants to leave testimonials as to the usefulness of the online CoP. Finally, from the teacher educator perspective, setting up and running an online CoP is an additional burden on already heavy workloads. However, we found that although originally established as a top-down initiative, it grew as a bottom-up process with the participants self-generating the content and activity. We envisage it may be possible for teacher educators to moderate an online CoP in one hour a week.

Considering the possible limitations to teacher training providers being able to establish online CoPs in a similar way, we summarise the literature offering three other possible pre-service activities teacher educators can implement to better prepare NLTs for the realities of teaching. Firstly, the rich, authentic data from NLTs generated by online CoPs, including participant quotes from the current study, can be developed into a bank of materials to use on pre-service training courses. In this way, critical incidents describing personal highs and lows can be repurposed as a teaching and learning resource for reflective class discussions (Farrell, 2019). Secondly, such online accounts could be developed further into larger case studies detailing what really happens in the early stages of a teaching career from a wide variety of teaching contexts (Farrell, 2019). Farrell describes how using either of these ideas promotes 'anticipatory reflection', which aims to facilitate NLT discussion as a preparation exercise. As a way of organising NLTs' reflective narratives, Farrell (2006) suggests implementing a story-structure framework of setting, complication and resolution. Finally, a more direct way of improving teacher preparation is to offer a supplementary course called 'Teaching in the First Years' so NLTs can better manage challenges and conflicts (Farrell, 2021) and draw on some of the materials and resources described here.

7

Conclusion

In this small-scale study, we aimed to investigate the challenges that NLTs face in the first few months of teaching post-initial teacher training certificate, and to determine whether a tutor-moderated online CoP helped alleviate any of those difficulties. Despite our wide prior reading of the literature on the challenges that NLTs face, we were still shocked to learn of the rollercoaster of emotions and number of challenges experienced by our group of participants, all of whom, it should be noted are capable, independent teachers who had done well on their initial teacher education courses. This study adds to the body of research calling for more support for NLTs, particularly in those crucial first few months post-cert.

Regarding the tutor-moderated online CoP, we found that most participants felt that they had benefited from the support offered by other members of the online CoP: both social and emotional support, as well as practical teaching support. As summarised by Kelly and Antonio (2016), the support gained from online interactions is a 'significant contributor to job satisfaction, professional development and teacher retention' (p. 138). We argue that the teacher interactions in our study have evidenced all of these areas. It serves as a reminder that, in online communities, members can be both learners and teachers (Trust & Horrocks, 2019).

The findings of the current study also suggest that tutor-moderated online CoPs may offer additional benefits to other either work-based, informal or large-scale open online CoPs. We discussed some of the factors that teacher educators may need to consider when setting up an online CoP including finding the right balance of tutor involvement and the optimal size of the group.

Finally, there may be a prevailing thought among teacher educators that once trainee teachers graduate from their initial teacher education courses, they become someone else's problem. However, we argue that some level of post-cert support from pre-service training providers, in addition to the support provided by employers and elsewhere, may be necessary in order to ensure as many NLTs as possible survive those potentially very challenging first few months of teaching in order to be able to thrive through the rest of their teaching careers.

References

- Allard, C. C., Goldblatt, P. F., Kemball, J. I., Kendrick, S. A., Millen, K. J. & Smith, D. M. (2007). Becoming a reflective community of practice. *Reflective practice*, 8(3), 299–314.
- Baker, A., & Beames, S. (2016). Good CoP: What Makes a Community of Practice Successful? *Journal of Learning Design*, 9(1), 72–79.
- Barak, A., Boniel-Nissim, M., & Suler, J. (2008). Fostering empowerment in online support groups. *Computers in human behavior*, 24(5), 1867–1883.
- Bell-Robertson, C. G. (2011). *Sharing emotional repertoire: A case study of an online community of practice for novice music teachers*. The University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee.
- Beltman, S., Mansfield, C., & Price, A. (2011). Thriving not just surviving: A review of research on teacher resilience. *Educational research review*, 6(3), 185–207.
- Boyd, D. M., & Ellison, N. B. (2007). Social network sites: Definition, history, and scholarship. *Journal of computer-mediated Communication*, 13(1), 210–230.
- Brannan, D., & Bleistein, T. (2012). Novice ESOL teachers' perceptions of social support networks. *TESOL Quarterly*, 46(3), 519–541.
- Bransford, J. D., Brown, A. L., & Cocking, R. R. (Eds.). (1999). *How people learn: Brain, mind, experience, and school*. National Academy Press.
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative research in psychology*, 3(2), 77–101.
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2021). *Thematic analysis: a practical guide*. Sage Publications.
- Clarà, M., Kelly, N., Mauri, T., & Danaher, P.A. (2017). Can massive communities of teachers facilitate collaborative reflection? Fractal design as a possible answer. *Asia-Pacific Journal of Teacher Education*, 45(1), 86–98.
- Daniel, G. R., Auhl, G., & Hastings, W. (2013). Collaborative feedback and reflection for professional growth: Preparing first-year pre-service teachers for participation in the community of practice. *Asia-Pacific journal of teacher education*, 41(2), 159–172.
- DelliCarpini, M. (2009). Dialogues across disciplines: Preparing English-as-a-second-language teachers for interdisciplinary collaboration. *Current Issues in Education*, 11.
- DePalma, R., & Teague, L. (2008). A democratic community of practice: Unpicking all those words. *Educational Action Research*, 16(4), 441–456.
- DeWert, M. H., Babinski, L. M., & Jones, B. D. (2003). Safe passages: Providing online support to beginning teachers. *Journal of teacher education*, 54(4), 311–320.
- Dille, K. B., & Røkenes, F. M. (2021). Teachers' professional development in formal online communities: A scoping review. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 105, 103431.
- Enfield, M., & Stasz, B. (2011). Presence without being present: Reflection and action in a community of practice. *Journal of the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning*, 11(1), 108–118.
- Farrell, T. S. (2003). Learning to teach English language during the first year: Personal influences and challenges. *Teaching and teacher education*, 19(1), 95–111.
- Farrell, T. S. (2006). The first year of language teaching: Imposing order. *System*, 34(2), 211–221.
- Farrell, T. S. (2009). Critical reflection in a TESL course: Mapping conceptual change. *ELT Journal*, 63(3), 221–229.
- Farrell, T. S. (2012). Novice-service language teacher development: Bridging the gap between preservice and in-service education and development. *TESOL Quarterly*, 46(3), 435–449.
- Farrell, T. S. (2016a). Surviving the transition shock in the first year of teaching through reflective practice. *System*, 61, 12–19.
- Farrell, T. S. (2016b). TESOL, a profession that eats its young! The importance of reflective practice in language teacher education. *Iranian Journal of Language Teaching Research*, 4(3), 97–107.
- Farrell, T. S. (2019). Reflective practice in L2 teacher education. In S. Walsh, & S. Mann (Eds.), *The Routledge handbook of English language teacher education* (pp. 38–51). Routledge.

- Farrell, T. S. (2021). The novice years of TESOL teaching. *The TESOL encyclopedia of English language teaching*, 1–7. John Wiley & Sons.
- Farrell, T. S. (2022). 'I felt a sense of panic, disorientation and frustration all at the same time': the important role of emotions in reflective practice. *Reflective Practice*, 23(3), 382–393.
- Graves, L. N. (1992). Cooperative learning communities: Context for a new vision of education and society. *Journal of Education*, 174(2), 57–79.
- Hanson-Smith, E. (2006). Communities of practice for pre-service and in-service teacher education. In P. Hubbard & M. Levy (Eds.), *Teacher Education in CALL* (pp. 301–315). John Benjamins.
- Heider, K. L. (2005). Teacher isolation: How mentoring programs can help. *Current Issues in Education*, 8.
- Herrington, A., Herrington, J., Kervin, L., & Ferry, B. (2006). The design of an online community of practice for beginning teachers. *Contemporary issues in technology and teacher education*, 6(1), 120–132.
- Hertzog, H. S. (2002). "When, How, and Who Do I Ask for Help?": Novices' Perceptions of Problems and Assistance. *Teacher Education Quarterly*, 29(3), 25–41.
- Hiver, P. (2016). The triumph over experience: hope and hardiness in novice L2 teachers. In P. D. MacIntyre, T. Gregersen, & S. Mercer (Eds.), *Positive Psychology in Second Language Acquisition* (pp. 168–192). Multilingual Matters.
- Hou, H. (2015). What makes an online community of practice work? A situated study of Chinese student teachers' perceptions of online professional learning. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 46, 6–16.
- Ingersoll, R. M., & Smith, T. M. (2003). The wrong solution to the teacher shortage. *Educational Leadership*, 60(8), 30–33.
- Johnson, C. M. (2001). A survey of current research on online communities of practice. *The internet and higher education*, 4(1), 45–60.
- Johnson, R. K., Harrold, M. L., Cochran, D. J., Brannan, D., & Bleistein, T. (2014). An examination of the first years: novice ESOL teachers' experiences with loneliness and stress. *Pure insights*, 3(8). scispace.com/pdf/an-examination-of-the-first-years-novice-esol-teachers-4wysqftlbe.pdf
- Kelly, N., & Antonio, A. (2016). Teacher peer support in social network sites. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 56, 138–149.
- Kiely, R., & Askham, J. (2012). Furnished imagination: the impact of preservice teacher training on early career work in TESOL. *TESOL Quarterly*, 46(3), 496–518.
- Kinman, G., Wray, S., & Strange, C. (2011). Emotional labour, burnout and job satisfaction in UK teachers: The role of workplace social support. *Educational Psychology*, 31(7), 843–856.
- Lantz-Andersson, A., Lundin, M., & Selwyn, N. (2018). Twenty years of online teacher communities: A systematic review of formally-organized and informally-developed professional learning groups. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 75, 302–315.
- Lave, J. (1991). Situating learning in communities of practice. In L. B. Resnick, J. M. Levine, & S. D. Teasley (Eds.), *Perspectives on socially shared cognition* (pp. 63–82). American Psychological Association.
- Li, L. C., Grimshaw, J. M., Nielsen, C., Judd, M., Coyte, P. C., & Graham, I. D. (2009). Evolution of Wenger's concept of community of practice. *Implementation science*, 4, 1–8.
- Liljekvist, Y. E., Randahl, A-C., van Bommel, J., & Olin-Scheller, C. (2021). Facebook for professional development: Pedagogical content knowledge in the centre of teachers' online communities. *Scandinavian Journal of Educational Research*, 65(5), 723–735.
- Lin, F-r., Lin, S-c., & Huang, T-P. (2008). Knowledge sharing and creation in a teachers' professional virtual community. *Computers & Education*, 50(3), 742–756.
- Mandel, S. (2006). What new teachers really need: What first-year teachers say they need to survive the job is often markedly different from what schools provide. *Educational Leadership*, 63(6), 66–69.
- Mann, S., & Tang, E. H-H. (2012). The role of mentoring in supporting novice English language teachers in Hong Kong. *TESOL Quarterly*, 46(3), 472–495.
- Muls, J., Triquet, K., Vlieghe, J., De Backer, F., Lombaerts, C-Z., & Lombaerts, K. (2019). Facebook group dynamics: an ethnographic study of the teaching and learning potential for secondary school teachers. *Learning, Media and Technology*, 44(2), 162–179.

Palloff, R., & Pratt, K. (1999). *Building learning communities in cyberspace: effective strategies for the online classroom*. Jossey-Bass.

Prestridge, A. (2019). Categorising teachers' use of social media for their professional learning: A self-generating professional learning paradigm. *Computers & Education*, 129, 143–158.

Shin, S-K. (2012). "It cannot be done alone": The socialization of novice English teachers in South Korea. *TESOL Quarterly*, 46(3), 542–567.

Trust, T., & Horrocks, B. (2019). Six key elements identified in an active and thriving blended learning community of practice. *TechTrends*, 63(2), 108–115.

Vangrieken, K., Meredith, C., Packer, T., & Kyndt, E. (2017). Teacher communities as a context for professional development: A systematic review. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 61, 47–59.

Walker, L., Carson, M., Datti, D., & Lee, J. (2020). Joining the club: Teachers collaborate to develop a research mindset and unlock the benefits of teacher research. *Teacher Development Academic Journal*, 1(1), 66–83.

Wenger, E. (1998). *Communities of Practice: Learning, meaning and identity*. Cambridge University Press.

Wenger-Trayner, B., & Wenger-Trayner, E. (2015, June). *Introduction to communities of practice: a brief overview of the concept and its uses*. www.wenger-trayner.com/introduction-to-communities-of-practice/

Wong, I. Y. F. (2002). *Toward an agenda for helping the beginning teacher: Perceptions of concerns and best help strategies* [Doctoral dissertation, National Institute of Education, Nanyang Technological University]. NIE Digital Repository. hdl.handle.net/10497/1641

Yang, S. H. (2009). Using blogs to enhance critical reflection and community of practice. *Journal of Educational Technology & Society*, 12(2), 11–21.

Zembylas, M. (2014). The place of emotion in teacher reflection: Elias, Foucault and 'critical emotional reflexivity'. *Power and Education*, 6(2), 210–222.

Appendices

Appendix A

Phase 1: Questionnaire to determine post-training challenges faced by NLTs

1. Which of these classroom/school challenges do you currently face? (Select all that apply.)

- ☐ Classroom management/disruptive students
- ☐ Meeting needs of disadvantaged students
- ☐ Unsupportive/disorganised leadership staff
- ☐ Lack of resources/equipment
- ☐ Relationships with parents/students
- ☐ Geographical/social isolation
- ☐ Relationships with colleagues
- ☐ Scrutiny of peers/parents/principal
- ☐ Using material prepared by others
- ☐ None of the above

2. During your first teaching job post-initial teaching qualification, which of these classroom/school challenges did you face? (Select all that apply.)

- ☐ Classroom management/disruptive students
- ☐ Meeting needs of disadvantaged students
- ☐ Unsupportive/disorganised leadership staff
- ☐ Lack of resources/equipment
- ☐ Relationships with parents/students
- ☐ Geographical/social isolation
- ☐ Relationships with colleagues
- ☐ Scrutiny of peers/parents/principal
- ☐ Using material prepared by others
- ☐ None of the above

3. Which of these classroom/school challenges do you feel have become easier as your career has progressed? (Select all that apply.)

- ☐ Classroom management/disruptive students
- ☐ Meeting needs of disadvantaged students
- ☐ Unsupportive/disorganised leadership staff
- ☐ Lack of resources/equipment
- ☐ Relationships with parents/students
- ☐ Geographical/social isolation
- ☐ Relationships with colleagues
- ☐ Scrutiny of peers/parents/principal
- ☐ Using material prepared by others
- ☐ None of the above

4. Which of these professional/work challenges do you face in your current job?

(Select all that apply.)

- ☐ Heavy workload/lack of time
- ☐ Difficult schools, courses or classes
- ☐ Externally imposed regulations
- ☐ Poor hiring practices/insecurity
- ☐ Curriculum/classroom knowledge
- ☐ Unsupportive/no mentor
- ☐ Low salary/poor funding
- ☐ None of the above

5. During your first job post-initial teaching qualification, which of these professional/work challenges did you face? (Select all that apply.)

- ☐ Heavy workload/lack of time
- ☐ Difficult schools, courses or classes
- ☐ Externally imposed regulations
- ☐ Poor hiring practices/insecurity
- ☐ Curriculum/classroom knowledge
- ☐ Unsupportive/no mentor
- ☐ Low salary/poor funding
- ☐ None of the above

6. Which of these professional/work challenges do you feel have become easier as your career has progressed? (Select all that apply.)

- ☐ Heavy workload/lack of time
- ☐ Difficult schools, courses or classes
- ☐ Externally imposed regulations
- ☐ Poor hiring practices/insecurity
- ☐ Curriculum/classroom knowledge
- ☐ Unsupportive/no mentor
- ☐ Low salary/poor funding
- ☐ None of the above

7. This next set of questions asks about the preparation and support you have received in your teaching posts. From where do you receive support? (Select all that apply.)

- ☐ School/administration support
- ☐ Mentor support
- ☐ Support of peers and colleagues
- ☐ Working with the students
- ☐ Characteristics of pre-service programme
- ☐ Support of family and friends
- ☐ Other
- ☐ I do not receive any support

8. During your first teaching job post-initial teaching qualification (e.g. CELTA), from where did you receive support? (Select all that apply.)

- ☐ School/administration support
- ☐ Mentor support
- ☐ Support of peers and colleagues
- ☐ Working with the students
- ☐ Characteristics of pre-service programme
- ☐ Support of family and friends
- ☐ Other
- ☐ I did not receive any support

9. How often do you receive continuous professional development workshops/sessions/training at your current employer?

- ☐ Once a week or more often
- ☐ Once a fortnight
- ☐ Once a month
- ☐ Once every three months
- ☐ Once every six months
- ☐ Once a year
- ☐ Never

10. During your first teaching job post-initial teaching qualification (e.g. CELTA), how often did you receive continuous professional development workshops/sessions/training?

- ☐ Once a week or more often
- ☐ Once a fortnight
- ☐ Once a month
- ☐ Once every three months
- ☐ Once every six months
- ☐ Once a year
- ☐ Never

Note: Questions 11, 12, 14, and 16–32 require a Likert scale response: 1 = Strongly disagree; 2 = Somewhat disagree; 3 = Neither agree nor disagree; 4 = Somewhat agree 5 = Strongly agree

11. My initial teacher training course prepared me for my current job.

12. My initial teacher training course prepared me for my first job post.

13. My current employers provided me with an induction when I started work for them.

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No

14. The induction for my current job helped me prepare for my role.

15. The employers at my first job post-initial teaching certificate (e.g. CELTA) provided me with an induction when I started work for them.

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No

16. The induction for my first job post initial teaching certificate (e.g. CELTA) helped me prepare for my role.
17. I struggle with the teaching workload in my current job.
18. I struggled with the teaching workload in my first job post-initial teaching certificate (e.g. CELTA).
19. I am finding my current job easy.
20. I found my first job post-initial teaching certificate (e.g. CELTA) easy.
21. I feel that I am being supported by my current employers to allow me to do my job well.
22. In my first teaching job post-initial teaching qualification (e.g. CELTA), I felt that I was supported by my employers to allow me to do my job well.
23. I feel like I am supported in my current job regarding access to professional development opportunities (e.g. workshops, conferences, training).
24. In my first teaching job post-initial teaching qualification (e.g. CELTA), I felt like I was supported regarding access to professional development opportunities (e.g. workshops, conferences, training).
25. I have thought about quitting the profession since starting my current teaching job.
26. In my first teaching job post-initial teaching qualification (e.g. CELTA), I thought about quitting the profession.
27. I am enjoying my current job.
28. I enjoyed my first teaching job post-initial teaching qualification (e.g. CELTA).
29. I would be interested in an online support group to help me adjust to my current job. This online group might include novice teachers, slightly more experienced teachers and teacher trainers, access to resources and materials, guidance on lesson planning, and discussions of specific topics, e.g. motivating learners.
30. During my first teaching job post initial teaching qualification (e.g. CELTA), I would have been interested in an online support group to help me adjust to my job. This online group might include novice teachers, slightly more experienced teachers and teacher trainers, access to resources and materials, guidance on lesson planning, and discussions of specific topics, e.g. motivating learners.
31. I would be interested in receiving continued support from my Cert trainers in my current job.
32. I would have been interested in receiving continued support from my Cert trainers in my first teaching job post -initial teaching qualification (e.g. CELTA).

Note: Questions 33–38 are open questions requiring a written response.

33. What do you like best about your current job and this profession?
34. What did you like best about your first teaching job post-initial teaching qualification (e.g. CELTA) and this profession at the time?
35. What is your biggest challenge with your current job and this profession?
36. What was the biggest challenge with your first teaching job post-initial teaching qualification (e.g. CELTA) and this profession at the time?
37. What one thing would support you most in your current job?
38. What one thing would have supported you most in your first teaching job post-initial teaching qualification (e.g. CELTA)?

Appendix B

Pilot CoP prompts and mentoring

Post 1	Aims and initial prompts
Example	We are thinking about putting together a teaching support/mentoring group for our graduates (and year-abroad students who teach) – either on FB or more likely on a separate website. It would be a place where we can share ideas, ask questions and keep learning. Firstly, do you think it's a good idea? And if so, perhaps we could dip our toes in a little now. How different is your teaching context to the UCLan free English classes you taught? Does the new context bring any additional challenges or has it forced a change in the way you teach? And you might be interested to read this article by Bax (2003) that talks about the importance of the teaching context and how we shouldn't think CLT works everywhere.
Resources	Bax, S. (2003). The end of CLT: A context approach to language teaching. <i>ELT journal</i> , 57(3), 278–287.
Post 2	Teaching with minimal preparation and materials
Example	Last week (anonymous) brought up the issue of how new teachers can go from teaching once every five weeks on your BA TESOL to teaching 30 hours a week, every week. One way to help with this is to have a couple of low-to-no-prep lessons up your sleeve. An old colleague of mine, Ken Lackman, has over the years developed a few really good lesson frameworks that, once learned, require little or no lesson prep and can be used for any level and any type of class. Does anyone else have a lesson that they use when there is no time to prepare?
Resources	Lackman, K. <i>No-lesson-plan Lesson Plan 1</i> . www.kenlackman.com www.kenlackman.com/files/NLPLP1sample2.pdf
Post 3	Your trainers' top fillers for the last 15 minutes of class
Example	Another way you can help yourself out and ease the stress of planning is to have a bunch of fillers up your sleeve so that if you finish 10–20 minutes early, you don't need to panic, start the next unit or over-plan the next time. I asked some colleagues what their favourite go-to fillers are. You'll know a lot of the activities and none are revolutionary, but they are all useful, low-or-no prep, and fun. They can loosely be grouped into activities that review and recycle language, activities that provide fluency practice (either spoken or written) and activities that work on decoding listening skills. Please share any fillers you use.
Resources	Reviewing language Backs-to-board: a student from each team sits with his/her back to the board. You write a word on the board. Their team have to describe it without saying the actual word. The teammate with their back to the board has to shout out the word. A point is awarded for the first one to get it. Fluency practice Speed-date interviews: Half the class sit around the outside facing in, and the other half on the inside facing out. They talk in pairs for two minutes (you give them a topic, or a question, or they just interview each other). After two minutes, everyone on the inside moves one place clockwise and talks to their new partner (same or different topic). Repeat. Listening skills Chain of words: students take it in turns to say a word that begins with the last letter of the previous word that was mentioned. E.g. if the topic is School, Student A will start with LecturE, Student B will say English, Student C will say HistorY, etc. Can be done in groups or with individual students competing against each other. Can include spelling as well if you ask students to write the words on the board to visualise the chain.

Post 4	Problems with listening
Example	(Anonymous) has been teaching general English in Japan for two years. One of his better students, Yui, approached him recently after class and asked him what she could do to improve her listening. She said that she couldn't make out individual words in a stream of speech even though when she later saw the audioscript, she 'knew' the individual words. What advice would you give to Yui? What advice would you give to Rob for his listening lessons? Is there anything he could do differently to help improve Yui and her classmates' listening skills? Please post your ideas below and then I'll post the advice that I gave Rob in a couple of days.
Resources	Field, J. (2010). Listening in the language classroom. <i>ELT Journal</i> , 64(3), 331–333.
Post 5	Teaching mixed-ability classes
Example	Here's another problem that we've received. (Anonymous) is teaching in Korea and has been struggling with one of his secondary school classes (16-year-olds). There are a range of levels (from elementary to intermediate +) and he said that he has difficulty pitching his lessons at the right level. It seems to be too easy for the strongest students and too difficult for the weakest, and both groups appear to be switching off. Have you taught mixed-ability classes? What did you do to ensure as many learners in your class as possible were benefiting from your lessons? Is anyone out there teaching in Korea at the moment? What advice would you give? Please post your ideas below.
Resources	Essinki, M. (2009). Mixed ability or mixed blessing. <i>English Teaching Professional</i>, 60, 12–14. Hayes, D. (1997). Helping teachers to cope with large classes. <i>ELT Journal</i>, 51(2), 106–116. Tennant, A. (2017). The dangers of differentiation. <i>English teaching professional</i>, 112, 4–6.
Post 6	Repeating tasks
Example	(Anonymous) has been teaching for a few months in a private language school in Britain to young adults. She's been struggling with planning 25 hours of teaching a week. One of her colleagues suggested that she just repeat tasks in class, i.e. get them to do the same task again, without making any changes. On the one hand, she was worried that the learners might get bored but on the other she had a feeling that getting them to repeat the same task might actually be good for them. What advice would you give? Have you ever repeated tasks with your learners? What was the outcome? How did the learners react? Please post your ideas and I'll post the advice that I gave Anna in a few days.
Resources	One way to make things easier on yourself planning-wise is to repeat tasks. New teachers often feel that everything has to be new and different and that learners will get bored if tasks are repeated. Research into task repetition suggests that repeating a task can boost fluency, confidence, involvement, and some studies also suggest accuracy and complexity. Task repetition can be very successfully combined with student reflection and error feedback and can be repeated in the same lesson or spread out once every week or two for a number of weeks (benefiting from the spacing effect). One activity is Fluency-Accuracy-Fluency. This task is a variation on a common vocabulary practice activity for useful phrases/collocations that have already been presented/discovered. Fluency: In groups, learners have a discussion about a given topic. No use of specific target language is required. Accuracy: Change groups. Repeat discussion, but this time the learners have the phrases face up on slips of paper. If a learner uses one of the phrases, it is picked up and placed in a pile next to him/her. The person who has the most slips of paper at the end wins. Fluency: Change groups. Repeat the discussion for a third time with the phrases face up, but without playing a game. They can use them if they want but are not required to. De Jong, N., & Perfetti, C. A. (2011). Fluency training in the ESL classroom: An experimental study of fluency development and proceduralization. <i>Language learning</i>, 61(2), 533–568.

Post 7	Making gap-fills fun
Example	Often, we have to use the coursebook, either because it's dictated by our employers or we simply don't have time to create whole lessons from scratch. One problem I have found is that they tend to be dull, partly because they are full of gap-fills. Gap-fills are uncommunicative, very controlled practice activities. While it is important to include lots of communicative, meaningful practice even for controlled practice (info-gap activities are the best), gap-fills do also have their uses. They can help learners understand form, can help clarify the meaning/use, and the better type make learners choose the correct form/meaning mappings. Please add any suggestions that you have found or used. Here is one suggestion: Grass-skirt Make one copy of the gap-fill for each team of two/three students, making sure to cut along between each question almost up to the edge, so that it looks like a grass skirt and it is easy to pull off each question. Stick them on the wall. The game: one student from each team runs up, grabs the first question, runs back to their team and together they fill it in. The runner then brings it to the teacher, who checks to see if it is correct. If it is correct, they go and get the next question. If it is incorrect, they return to their team and correct it. The first team to finish all their questions is the winner.
Resources	DeKeyser, R. (2010). Practice for second language learning: Don't throw out the baby with the bathwater. <i>International Journal of English Studies</i> , 10(1), 155–165.
Post 8	Second language acquisition principles
Example	Why do we use the techniques, methods, approaches that we do in the classroom? Because our tutors told us to do it this way? Because it works? Because students/schools expect it? Similarly, have you found yourself challenging and rejecting some of those techniques and methods because they don't fit with your teaching context? I'd like to share an article that I find myself giving out in all my teacher training classes. It's a great summary of findings from second language acquisition research and how they impact on what we do in the classroom. I've also found that articles like this have resulted in me becoming much less rigid about what is 'acceptable' and what is not in the classroom. Take a look at each of these principles below and have a think about what you do in the classroom that caters for it. Some could be really easy or basic things like doing pair work or praising. Others may be more complex lesson ideas. Please add any of your ideas or questions or comments below.
Resources	Ellis, R. (2005). Principles of instructed language learning. <i>System</i> , 33(2), 209–224.
Post 9	Mentors and Communities of Practice
Example	The first year of teaching can be isolating, stressful and overwhelming as we come to terms with the new teaching context (students, school systems, colleagues, parents, living in the country). Mentoring is one way to help navigate that crucial first year. Mentors are more experienced teachers who can help us settle into our new teaching context by offering advice, guidance and support. When I started out, I didn't have an official mentor but I did share a flat with a more experienced teacher who offered tips and advice. Looking back, I think I would have really benefited from having the opportunity to observe her teach, to have her observe me and offer help, to team teach together and to discuss my progress as a novice teacher in the new teaching context. Consider talking to your Director of Studies and seeing whether there is the possibility of getting an official mentor. It doesn't have to be a super-experienced teacher. In fact, one study found that it may be better to have a mentor who only has a year's experience. This way, he or she will be more likely to remember what it's like; there will be less feeling of being judged, it will be more of a collaborative endeavour, a community of practice. Alternatively, set up a reflective practice/reading/lesson planning group of colleagues, either in your school or with pals in other schools. Share lesson ideas, plan lessons together, read an article and discuss it. Be generous with your ideas and materials and your colleagues will tend to do the same in return. Creating a community of practice, or a collegiate atmosphere in the staffroom can make all the difference in helping overcome that feeling of isolation.

Resources	Asención Delaney, Y. (2012). Research on mentoring language teachers: Its role in language education. <i>Foreign Language Annals</i>, 45(SUPPL.1), s184-s202. Mann, S., & Tang, E. H. H. (2012). The role of mentoring in supporting novice English language teachers in Hong Kong. <i>TESOL Quarterly</i>, 46(3), 472–495.
Post 10	Getting into teacher training
Example	We've had a couple of questions about how to become a teacher trainer. I love being a teacher trainer and I would recommend it as a potential career path. You can start by actively sharing your ideas, materials and time, and get experience of different classes (levels and learner types). Suggest peer-teaching or peer-observations. Offer to lead CPD sessions or mentor new colleagues. Attend conferences and keep learning! Which of these things do you do, have you done or would you like to do? Do you have any other advice to offer? If you have any questions about getting into teacher training, feel free to post below.
Resources	Davies, B., & Northall, N. (2018). No one told me that! 1. <i>English teaching professional</i>, 117, 49–51.

Appendix C

Final online CoP posts

Week 0	Welcome to our Novice Teacher Support Group/Online Community of Practice*
	To get the ball rolling, and while we wait for everyone to join, tell us a little about your teaching context. 1. Where are you teaching? What's the context? (residential summer school for kids 7–15? Summer school in a language school in Liverpool for adults 18+? ESOL class in Chorley?) 2. How many hours are you going to be teaching? How many weeks? 3. When do you start? 4. Have you had/are you going to have an induction? How was it? 5. What are your feelings as you prepare to teach? What are you worried about? What are you excited about? 6. What do you hope to get out of this support group? Looking forward to working with you all over the next month or so Neil and Nicola * What is a community of practice, I hear you ask? Well, it's a group of people who share a common interest, profession or craft (in our case, language teachers) and come together to support, share knowledge, learn from each other, and improve our skills through regular interaction. The concept was first introduced by social learning theorists Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger in the early 1990s. We're happy to share any articles/readings if anyone is interested. Basically, we're here for each other over the next month or so.
Week 1	Welcome officially to the start of the project
	For the next six weeks we'll be supporting each other as we teach. Could we remind you: 1 hour of your time per week, spread out over several shorter bits. We would like you to respond and engage with each other. So please do reply to what others are saying. Use words instead of thumbs up if you can. We know how kind and empathetic you all are, so anything you can add to support, empathise, make others feel welcome and listened to, the better. If you haven't yet replied to the 'welcome' post with your teaching context, please do that first. For the first week, we'll be posting a prompt a day. They should only take five minutes or so to reply to. Could you then also read what the others have written and respond to that? However, please do also post anything a) that you find useful for others; b) that is on your mind that others may be able to help or support you with. Prompt one: a) Complete the poll; and then b) choose one emoticon that best represents your emotions at the moment. Post it below and then respond to all the others with an appropriate emoticon. Prompt A colleague shared this website/app which allows you to create your own AI generated songs, based on a prompt. Here's one about novice teachers in language schools: suno.com. Could it be used in class? Get your students to create their own song by writing a prompt with the things that they like, e.g. a rap song about me, Pedro from Spain, and my friend Pierre from France. We like football and dancing. We don't like doing homework. They could then vote on who has the best song and do some work on the vocab (translation; writing synonyms; finding rhyming, etc.). Do you have any go-to websites/apps/tech/teaching resources that you could share that means relatively low-prep lessons? Share them here. Oh, and I love craiyon.com for AI generated pictures. Feedback We'd just like to say well done for all your contributions in Week 1. We particularly like the way that you have, unprompted: replied and supported and asked questions to each other, posted good news, shared materials and shared your feelings. It's a fantastic start. Please keep this up. We'd like to see more of you replying to each other. As per the participant information sheet, we are looking for around ten posts per week. But they don't have to be long essay-style posts – how you've been replying so far is great. We are more interested in the way that you interact with each other.

Week 2	Welcome to Week 2!
	Prompt Some things to get you thinking and posting this week. How are things going this week and how are you feeling? What's going well? Can you give a specific example of something that made you smile? What are you worried about? Has anything not gone to plan? Is there anything you'd like to ask for advice about? Is there anything you have learned this week that others might find useful? We are more interested in your replies to each other and the way you interact rather than long essay style posts followed by not much interaction. We'd like to see ten posts from you this week please. Again, feel free to post anything else that is on your mind or you think would be useful. As the weeks go on, we are going to take more and more of a backseat, as this is your community of practice, not ours, and we want you to take control of it.
Week 3	Welcome to Week 3!
	Excellent work this last week. We're feeling the support that you are giving each other in this group. Do keep engaging with each other. We are looking for ten posts per week – they don't need to be long; interaction with others' posts is great. Keep posting about things that are going well; things you are worried about or struggling with; things you would like to share; things that made you laugh. And continue to provide advice, support, guidance, commiserations, materials and ideas.
Week 4	Welcome to Week 4 everyone
	Prompt We continue to enjoy reading about your experiences but, most of all, how you are supporting one another. Keep this going!! This is EXACTLY what we hoped the group would create – a supportive network. Remember, we are looking for around ten posts or contributions to others' posts per week. Hope you are all feeling more settled in your new roles. Maybe you could consider one thing you would tell/advise your Day One Self now you have been teaching a while?? Looking forward to more great interaction!
Week 5	Welcome to Week 5!
	Prompt We're super happy to read your continued support for each other. One quick question to get you started: Based on your experience over the past few weeks, is there any advice you would give for your teacher trainers to help you prepare better? That is, is there anything you'd add, or cut, or a different approach by your tutors?
Week 6	Welcome to Week 6!
	Well done everyone! This is the last official week of the study. We're really happy with your contributions so far. Please continue to support your fellow teachers, share ideas, thoughts and feelings through ten posts and replies this week. I'll post later in the week regarding next steps, e.g. arranging the post-study interview. Thank you again. We hope you have a lovely week of teaching!

Appendix D

Phase 2: Interview questions

Teaching

- Could you describe your emotions over the past six weeks? Have there been highs and lows?
- What helped you through those lows?
- What were some of the challenges you faced either inside or outside the classroom?
- How has this process made you feel about being a language teacher? Has it made you question whether you want to be a teacher or has it made you more determined this will be a career path for you?
- Is there anything you would change on your Trinity Cert/Uni studies to help you better prepare for this initial teaching? How can we better support you to be a novice teacher?
- What have you learned about yourself through this process?

The online CoP

- What was your overall impression of the online CoP/support group?
- How useful was it?
- What are the top two or three ways the online community supported you, e.g. social, practical teaching, emotional, professional?
- What other sources of support did you have, e.g. mentors, colleagues, classmates, other online resources, friends and family?
- What motivated you to participate in the group?
- How often did you post? How many minutes a day? Did you find it easy to post ten times a week? How long did you spend each day?
- Would you have used it if you weren't being paid? Would you have posted so often if you weren't being paid?
- Which did you find easier/more beneficial – posting yourself and then getting feedback or reading others' posts and giving feedback?
- What limited your ability/willingness to participate with the support group?
- Are there topics/problems/challenges/things that you would not feel comfortable sharing in this group? Give examples.
- In general, what things are needed to make it a successful support group?
- What would you change about this group?
- Would you have liked more from your tutors?
- What would be an ideal number of group members?
- If we were to run it again next year for post-Trinity Cert teachers (but without paying them), what advice would you give us to make it successful?
- What was your impression of the platform, i.e. Facebook?

About the British Council

We support peace and prosperity by building connections, understanding and trust between people in the UK and countries worldwide. We work directly with individuals to help them gain the skills, confidence and connections to transform their lives and shape a better world in partnership with the UK. We support them to build networks and explore creative ideas, to learn English, to get a high-quality education and to gain internationally recognised qualifications. We work with governments and our partners in the education, English language and cultural sectors, in the UK and globally. Working together, we make a bigger difference, creating benefit for millions of people all over the world. We work with people in over 200 countries and territories and are on the ground in more than 100 countries. Founded in 1934, we are a UK charity governed by Royal Charter and a UK public body.

www.britishcouncil.org



ISBN 978-1-915280-69-5

© text: Nicola Halenko and Neil Walker. 2025, licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution Non-Commercial 4.0 International Licence (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>)

The British Council is the United Kingdom's international organisation for cultural relations and educational opportunities.