Creating a reflective community of practice to promote new media integration in the Greek EFL classroom: an online-learning case study

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to examine whether an online, reflective community of practice can promote the endorsement of new media pedagogies in the Greek EFL (English as a foreign language) classroom. To this end, a four-month online learning programme addressing the specific needs of nineteen in-service EFL teachers was designed, implemented and evaluated exploring the participating teachers' digital and reflective practices and attitudes. Moreover, we sought to study whether distance learning training can enhance the community feeling encouraging the exchange of good teaching practices infusing learners' motivation. The mixed-methods postgraduate research results were promising and revealed the intrinsic motivation of the teachers to learn new web tools, share ideas and pedagogical scenarios within the socio-constructive zeitgeist of foreign language pedagogy, ultimately enhancing their own and their learners' new literacies and lifelong learning skills. After all, the explosion of online, informal learning outside our schools, and the challenges it holds for our continuous professional development (CPD) is too powerful to ignore.

Keywords: Online learning, Reflective communities of practice, Teacher education, New media integration

Key issues in 21st century teacher education

Reflecting Plato's views, Freeman & Johnson (1998, p. 401) declared that "*teachers are not empty vessels waiting to be filled with theoretical and pedagogical knowledge*" proposing a socially-situated tripartite framework centring on: (1) teacher as a learner, (2) the social context of school and schooling, and (3) the teaching and learning processes. However, the present study views *teacher learning* in the digital era as permeating our social lives along with technology, including *non-formal* and *informal* learning settings (Andreatos, 2007). The latter is life-long and problem-related (Merriam et al., 2007).

Delving deeper into the field of web-based language learning, we have witnessed a paradigm shift from a knowledge-transmission model to 'socially negotiated' processes of learning to teach (Johnson, 2001) with *Cognitive Constructivism and Social Constructivism* as the most influential learning theories. *Connectivism* is also crucial for the digital era, affording learners the ability to connect with each other via networks storing, accessing and retrieving knowledge (Siemens, 2005).

However, adopting a socially-situated perspective (Lave & Wenger, 1991) calls for reshaping teachers' knowledge, values and beliefs, subjecting current teaching practices to a critical and reflective analysis (Kolb, 1984). Simply put, teachers need to engage in a lifelong process of continuously analysing and amending practices, based on in situ evidence involving inner and collaborative dialogue.

Communities of practice and e-learning

Accommodating 21st century teachers' needs, however, has to be in accordance with the principles of *adult learning* (Knowles, 1980). Kokkos (2005) stresses the need for the trainees' active participation in the learning process.

Communities of Practice (Wenger, 1998), henceforth CoPs, could act as an informal-learning proposal, with teachers supporting each other on a continuum of lifelong learning CPD. Therefore, adopting a socio-constructivist, Vygotsky (1978) perspective, members continuously reshape their identities through mutual engagement and negotiation of common initiatives sharing experience and repertoire of resources (Karacapilidis, 2010).

Ergo, CoPs can have a positive impact on teachers' reflective professional development as they connect teachers, provide a shared context and stimulate participatory learning (by doing, becoming and belonging). *E-learning* is crucial for a CoP to evolve and expand beyond local constraints, as its web-based nature can 'unite' audiences geographically apart, employing synchronous and asynchronous delivery modes with the added asset of its accessibility *"anywhere and anytime"* (Holmes & Gardner, 2006).

Nevertheless, mere transfer of traditional content to online platforms can result in disappointment. Therefore, the differentiated instructional character of online learning should be determined by its clearly-defined objectives, the adult education theories and the target group needs challenging both e-moderator, (Salmon, 2000), the person who has the role of the online teacher/trainer in this study, and teacher/trainees into new roles. More specifically, the main roles that an online-teacher performs are that of content facilitator, technologist, designer, manager/administrator, process facilitator, adviser/counsellor, assessor and researcher (Goodyear et al., 2001).

Online platforms for EFL teachers: entering a brave TELL classroom

Most of today's teachers have studied in an 'off-line' world; therefore, they are challenged to become technologically-literate whilst adhering to the theoretical underpinnings regarding the pedagogical, cognitive, sociocultural and psychological theories of foreign language learning in the new media context (Papaefthymiou-Lytra, 2014). Intrinsic motivation, transformative pedagogies embracing *new literacies* (Cope & Kalantzis, 2009), experiential learning, life-long-learning skills and Bloom's higher-order thinking skills are of paramount importance in determining the articulation of a novel, coherent, pedagogical framework (Kourtis-Kazoullis & Vlachos, 2014). Moving from more traditional *Computer Assisted Language Learning* (CALL) to *Technology Enhanced Language Learning* (TELL) many more devices, except computer, can be employed in class. Ultimately, however, it is not the technology per se but the new pedagogies 21st century teachers need to 'revisit' towards new media integration and *normalization* (Bax, 2003). Relevant literature confirms multiple benefits including inter alia enhancement of motivation, authenticity, learner-centeredness, experiential learning, diversified instruction, autonomy and positive classroom atmosphere (Skourtou & Kourtis-Kazoullis, 2002; Vlachos, 2006).

Educational technology INSET courses in the Greek context

At the heart of the Greek *in-service education and training* (INSET) reform debate, is reshaping teacher education in a regular and ongoing process, addressing the needs of our "*digital natives*", as Prensky (2009) calls our learners. The idea of *multiliteracies* introduced and revisited by Kalantzis and Cope (2008) and *multimodalities* (Kress, 2003) has expanded our meaning-making/semiosis. Consequently, new learning paradigms call for developing of

communicative and digital competences with teachers communicating synchronously and asynchronously effectively, networking, employing and assessing online resources, using multi-platforms and multi-device, participatory, e-learning practices in an ever-evolving universe that our learners inhabit (Coiro, 2003).

In Greece, programmes on the development of basic computer literacy skills were initiated in the first phase of *Information and Communication Technologies* (ICT) A-level (2001-2005). However, Greek state English teachers were until 2017 denied access to B-level teacher training of utilising ICTs in education. Additionally, a variety of asynchronous, distant seminars via the Moodle platform, implemented in many Greek regions since 2007, could be attended by foreign language teachers. Still, the pedagogical orientation in the integration of new media literacies is absent in many of the aforementioned courses (Tzotzou, 2018).

Research methodology

Research hypothesis, aim and questions

The present Hellenic Open University (HOU) postgraduate study was implemented adhering to the social-constructivist model of learning and the theoretical CoP framework. In addition, it was based on the hypothesis that Greek EFL learning cannot be deprived of the empowerment afforded to us by the pedagogical use of digital technology (Blake, 2013). Moreover, studies reveal a general feeling of disconnect experienced both locally and globally due to the inefficiency of the traditional teacher training model. This is enhanced by the absence of two crucial features, namely prior-analysis of teachers' needs and post- provision of feedback and support. Additionally, addressing the technology per se, and neglecting the pedagogical aspect of TELL, is a common weakness of INSET ICT courses, yielding only fragmentary gains.

The main aim of the current study is two-folded; the researcher attempted to explore the efficacy of an educational blog as a vehicle for distance teacher development intervention towards new media integration in praxis. Secondly, she sought to investigate if Greek EFL teachers are willing to embrace a CoP paradigm shift, showing active engagement.

More specifically, the research focused on the following questions:
1. What are the expectations of in-service EFL teachers from a CoP?
2. How can an educational blog promote reflective practices among the participating EFL teachers, creating a community feeling?
3. How can distance learning training encourage the exchange of good teaching practices and the design of pedagogical scenarios?
4. To what extent can an online learning platform promote the discussion and shift of attitudes towards the integration of new technologies in the EFL classroom with a positive impact on learners' motivation?
5. To what extent can the community of learning and practice cater for the particular teacher-trainees' needs?
6. How can a community of practice draw a more accurate picture of the new media pedagogies and web tools used in the Greek EFL classroom considering the limitations of the school reality?

Research context and tools

The study was conducted from December 2017 to March 2018. It focused on 19 EFL teachers. They were all state EFL permanent primary and secondary teachers, except for two, who were

working in the private sector. The varied geographical distribution of the participants, was prioritised as an added feature of reliability and more accurate representation. Ergo, the *random, purposeful sampling technique* was employed.
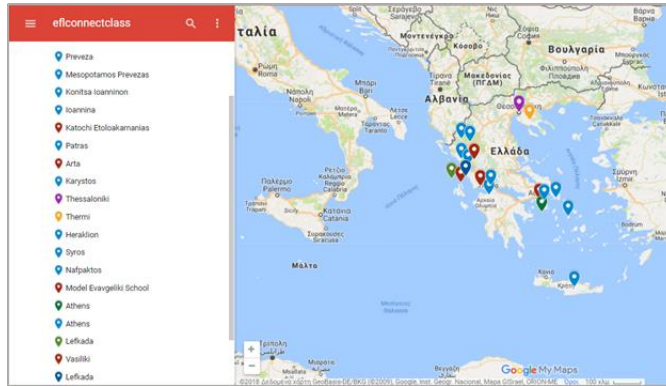

Figure 1. Map of participants' location

We opted for the close, dynamic collaboration between the researcher and the participants drawing data from multiple sources employing a *mixed-methods* research. The combination of quantitative and qualitative data collection could thus aid us develop meta-inferences (Venkatesh et al., 2013) yielding and triangulating our findings by avoiding the weaknesses inherent in its paradigm. The former entailed pre- and post- questionnaires, whilst the latter included mainly the teacher/trainees' comments and messages posted in the blog sessions as well as the welcome and discussion fora, designed for our online interaction.

The blog was the main space where two online sessions were held, mostly, on a weekly basis. These included blog posts containing power-point presentations, videos, graphs, links to university websites or educational blogs, articles and further recommended reading. At the end of each post, the participants were invited to answer to a reflective question or comment on the utility of the proposed web tools. Sample blog content can be seen in Screenshot 1.

Screenshot 1. Sample blog content on "reflective practice"

Consequently, the proposal of TELL activities or micro scenarios in their personal/digital portfolio pages, targeting their specific learners' needs, at the end of each module, challenged teachers to use experience, observation and theoretical input in an ongoing reflective process. Finally, the researcher's use of a reflective journal proved instrumental even from the "*getting started*"/*design phase* of the online procedures (Koch & Fusco, 2008).

Discussion of major research findings

This section focuses on an analysis of the most prominent study results, in relation to the six research questions, aided by data gathered from both Needs Analysis (NA) and Evaluation questionnaires as well as the online platform, that can be accessed at http://eflconnectclass.com/.

CoP expectations of in-service EFL teachers

Half of the participating teachers (52,6%) had never taken part in a CoP before, although they had online experience of Moodle seminars (68,4%), Massive Open Online Courses (36,8%) and HOU modules (52,6%). One participant summarised their primary expectation: "*share successful practices, exchange ideas and talk about common issues and worries*". In essence, a more participative network was sought encouraging communication, contribution of practised ideas and socialisation of experience. Hence, the teacher development element could be overlapping and interweaved with the social and the cognitive presence online.

Concerning their anticipation of negative community aspects, their answers could be epitomised in the traditional seminars' stereotypes, namely loss of interest or originality, repetition of clichés, student-like feeling and judgemental character. A point highlighted was the "*hope to use what I learn in this community in class*". Therefore, implementing the proposed pedagogies in authentic classroom settings was pivotal in the design of meaningful and realistic web activities addressing the practitioners' actual needs (Jimoyiannis et al., 2013).

Overall, the teachers answered in an overwhelmingly positive way (18 out of 19) in regard to their post-research CoP feelings. Seventeen felt part of the CoP and cited their primary expectation, sharing teaching practices, fulfilled. Besides, teachers greatly valued that they learnt new things (18), exchanged practices (17), ideas (16) and saw that other EFL teachers shared the same problems (14). The same benefits were also mentioned by Kourkouli (2015) about the PEAP 2gather CoP, launched for primary EFL teachers by the University of Athens in 2010. These included collaborative exchange of opinions, sharing of experiences and application of teaching practices.

Promotion of reflective practices creating a community feeling

Prior to the research, all participants confirmed they used Shon's (1983) "*reflection-in-action*" and "*reflection-on-action*". However, half of them (10) had not even attempted self-observation and seven did not use teaching/reflective journals. In order to 'stimulate' Kolb's reflective cycle (1984) teachers initially used their 'field' experience to critically discuss theoretical issues. Gradually, they observed more 'experienced peers' and aided by scaffolding and input material, entered the meaning-making/conceptualisation phase, finally progressing to their own active experimentation.

All teachers evidenced traits of self-reflection and critical analysis of both approaches and web tools presented, in their blog postings and personal pages. In the post-research questionnaire, ten advocated the benefit of their 'digital portfolio' pages. The degree of critical reflectivity was correlated with the different degree of active engagement, as can be seen in

Figure 2. Undeniably, the participants' roles ranging from 'extremely active'/core members to 'lurkers' can be easily identified here. The time constraint was the major reason cited by the less active/peripheral members. In addition, many earlier studies confirm that asynchronous online communication enhances reflectivity (Yang, 2009), as participants have more time to think and observe, in comparison with face-to-face interaction.
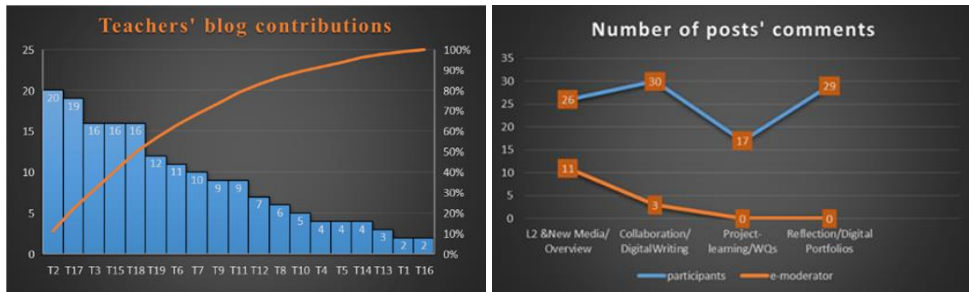
Figures 2 & 3. Teachers' online presence and number of posts

To aid corroboration of the quantitative findings, we decided to collect and analyse the blog and fora topics in terms of number of postings and initiation. In line graph 3, we juxtaposed these figures with the participants' earlier answers concerning interest of topics. Clearly, the number of the e-moderator's and the participants' blog comments are inversely proportional. Also, one can observe the peak of the comments to be in collaboration and reflection, which was cited as their second favourite topic. The inconsistency is that their favourite one, inquiry-based learning, received lower number of comments.

Finally, the evolution of community feeling is a long process to achieve or be 'cultivated', so only three participants mentioned it in their pre-research expectations. Yet, in the evaluation questionnaire, 17 teachers answered positively, and 16 confirmed their feeling was enhanced due to their participation. A valuable conclusion drawn, however, is that, despite experiencing the feeling of belonging, more time was needed to establish closer co-operation. Indeed, time is quintessential in Wenger's concept of identity and shared repertoire (Cousin & Deepwell, 2005). In fact, Koch & Fusco (2008) posit that for large-scale CoPs, the transition from *getting started* to *modeling/scaffolding* and ultimately *maturing phases* can take up to a year.

Exchange of good teaching practices and pedagogical scenarios

The sharing culture that was cultivated in our CoP, was asserted by the generous exchange of good ideas and practices. Overall, teachers shared thirty-five previously-tested and newly-implemented ideas or even resourceful adaptations, incorporating web tools presented in the blog. One teacher mentioned her enthusiasm to "*share thoughts, tools and material with experienced and open to new ideas colleagues!*". This goal was not only cited by 12 participants, as pre-study expectation, but to our delight, 17 out of 19 participants, also, acknowledged it as a post-study benefit. Thus, a cohort can become an empathetic community, attaining social and cognitive objectives. Hence, proceeding together from the synthesis of participants' experience to *co-constructing* 'practical' knowledge and *transforming* it to theoretically-embedded pedagogical scenarios, can only be collectively accomplished.

Promoting the discussion and shift of attitudes towards TELL integration enhancing learners' motivation
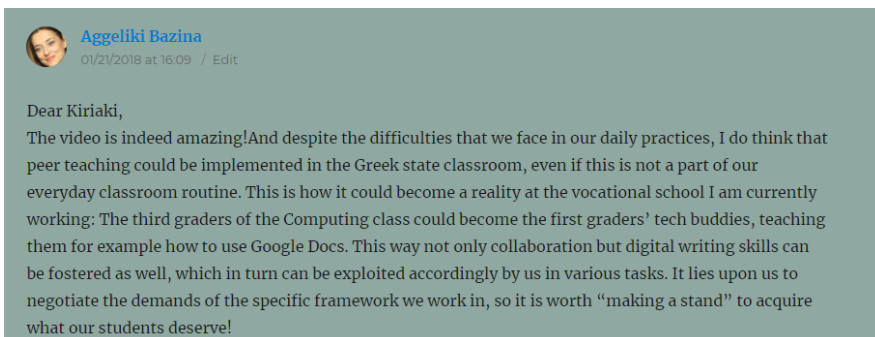
Teachers' endorsement of innovation is essential, for an actual shift of pedagogical approaches to be enacted. Our findings accorded with earlier studies, investigating EFL teachers' positive attitudes towards educational technology (Spiris, 2014) and Web 2.0 tools (Katerini, 2013). Regarding their learners' 21st century skills, the ability to evaluate relevant online content was prioritised by 18 teachers. Moreover, 17 out of 19 participants, emphasised the importance of locating information, reading multimodal texts, and digital writing.

Nevertheless, only ten asserted their initial confidence in designing TELL lessons. Hence, it was extremely encouraging that after their online engagement, 12 participants reported more positive attitudes, 13 admitted their ability to design web activities had enhanced and almost all (17) intended to use some of the tools presented in the CoP. When asked if the exchange of ideas had benefited their learners' motivation, teachers' comments illustrate their positivity: "*I'm amazed at how formerly reluctant students have turned to active participants*", "*they were motivated to participate and waited for the new lesson*".

Turning to the realistic constraints, the majority of participants cited *school-level barriers* (Bingimlas, 2009): poorly-equipped schools and classrooms, absence of technical support and limited access to ICT labs in line with earlier findings (Tzotzou, 2018). Limited time was also mentioned as a major impediment (84,2%). Another interesting finding yielded, was the low use of the Greek Ministry *digital school* facilities. The Greek School Network was used by 7 teachers, photodentro by 9 and the digital school site by 7.

Community of learning and practice: catering for the particular teacher-trainees' needs

The challenge for the researcher was to address diverse teachers' needs, due to the variety of their working sectors, geographical distribution, school facilities and ICT-training. Despite external and internal constraints, Sifakis (2011) states that EFL teachers prioritise educational technology in their training needs aligned with EPS-XG (2011) curricular guidelines. This is consistent with both international (OECD, 2013) and European Commission (2014) findings. According to the latter, it is imperative for teachers to "*explore the potential of open and digital learning*" (ibid., p. 20).

Aggeliki Bazina
01/21/2018 at 16:09 / Edit

Dear Kiriaki,
The video is indeed amazing! And despite the difficulties that we face in our daily practices, I do think that peer teaching could be implemented in the Greek state classroom, even if this is not a part of our everyday classroom routine. This is how it could become a reality at the vocational school I am currently working: The third graders of the Computing class could become the first graders' tech buddies, teaching them for example how to use Google Docs. This way not only collaboration but digital writing skills can be fostered as well, which in turn can be exploited accordingly by us in various tasks. It lies upon us to negotiate the demands of the specific framework we work in, so it is worth "making a stand" to acquire what our students deserve!

Screenshot 2. Blog reflective comment on "fostering collaboration"

In particular, the participants of the present study dedicated precious free time, to explore together "*fascinating technology, that is extra motivating for the students*", as one posted in the

welcome blog forum. YouTube was considered their top priority, and collaborative platforms like wikis and blogs their near top one. Speaking and writing were the skills most needed, but writing was regarded as the least motivating. In the post-evaluation, all participants responded that their needs were catered for; 89,5% to a great/some extent. Accordingly, one teacher commented that the "*blog has been abundant in innovative ideas for classroom use and useful resources, any educator can use to enhance their students' learning*".

Greek school reality: pedagogies, web tools used and limitations

The limited sample of the present research restricts generalisations. However, little has been done to compare the answers from previous Greek studies with the actual everyday teaching practices implemented. In our case study teachers debated and shared practices and mini-scenarios incorporating the tools they already used and new innovative ones we presented, reflecting on their learners' needs and solutions against day-to-day administrative or technical barriers. Therefore, our results can give us a limited, but more realistic, picture of what is happening in geographically dispersed primary and secondary schools.

In particular, the absolute (100%) dominance of YouTube use was once again reaffirmed (Karkoulia, 2016). On a smaller scale, few teachers employed word processors (8), digital storytelling (7) and Webquests (4). Blogs, wikis and Googledocs were recognised as needs, while Edmodo or weebly were not adopted, perhaps due to lack of training.

Additionally, authenticity, presenting new content and watching videos ranked high in their instructional goals. However, the unforeseen NA result was that, despite ICT- training and positive attitudes, almost half of the respondents (9) used new media, either rarely or once a month, employing *Open* or *Integrative CALL* philosophy. This constituted a paradox, we sought to amend. Hence, we explored digital writing (Richardson, 2006), inquiry-based learning as well as various Web2.0 tools promoting 'foundational' and new literacies. Alas, without the pedagogical rationale, the majority will remain in the lower-order of Bloom's revised taxonomy, forever missing Koutsogiannis' (2011) third cycle.

Blog content observations

Turning to the comparison of the above findings with observations arising from the inventory of blog and fora postings, it is worth noting that in the beginning the e-moderator had to sustain interest and discussion, as can be seen by the great number of postings in Figure 3. Gradually the researcher withdrew releasing initiative to the participants, who came to the fore undertaking active/core roles, leaving the peripheral ones to contribute at their own pace. Hence, the community became more teacher/trainee-centred.

The majority of teachers revealed their self-motivation to develop their pedagogy in order to meet the challenges of their learners. Heterogeneity was evident in terms of familiarisation with TELL. However, some participants used their expertise acting as assistant-moderators, peer-teaching and inspiring the less cognisant ones.

At the core of the research, they all admitted receiving practical advice and learning tools, they could use in class. Thirteen agreed or strongly agreed that the blog empowered them to design technology-enhanced activities and provide pedagogical rationale. Seventeen stated, it also addressed their teaching and learning needs. Moreover, almost all (17) found the input articles helpful, the use of theory justified and the weekly tasks relevant to their participant role, whereas sixteen considered the fora topics interesting. The plethora of materials was praised along with the e-moderator's hard work and professionalism inter alia. Their future suggestions included augmented learning, flipped classroom, games and learning difficulties.

Finally, participants highly commended the ability to download the material presented or share their own content, gathered on the platform's media library. Overall, they answered extremely positive when asked to justify if they considered the CoP a rewarding experience, as can be seen in the pie-chart (Figure 4).

Figure 4. Post-research teachers' positive evaluation of the CoP

Pedagogical implications

The discussion above is hoped to lend further support to the efficacy of online informal learning. Having established on the one hand, the growing interest of Greek EFL teachers towards the integration of new media, and on the other, the pedagogical inefficacy of traditional ICT-training programmes, we could argue that an online teacher development community would greatly enrich existing learning paradigms.

In particular, earlier studies have been conducted on the theoretical design, not the actual implementation, of similar INSET programmes, incorporating workshops on Web 2.0 tools (Katerini, 2013) or a blended-learning model on digital literacy (Tzotzou, 2017). However, what better learning mode can incorporate new media teacher and language development components, if not an e-learning platform, where all digital resources and pedagogical content use the subject we teach; English? After all, language learning is itself a 21st century skill. In sum, the feedback received, both in the post-questionnaire and in the blog postings was extremely positive. The blog enhanced meaning-making processes, reflection on their own and other participants' practices, experimentation and discussion of their teaching results in the community. Also, the uploaded scenarios and videos aided indirect peer-observation.

The above research has revealed, above all, that the teachers can be inspired to participate in regional/ national CPD online communities, if the design principles are relevancy-oriented to their particular needs. Besides, the great impetus of online over traditional communities lies in the fact that they are not norm-based or locus specific, but organized around meaningful, to their members, learning activities, overcoming geographical barriers, ultimately forging stronger bonds. Hence, INSET programmes can be conducive to learning, only if teachers feel part of the course-design process, central actors in the safe, positive communal environment. Therefore, NA surveys, prior to the initiatives, are imperative to motivate adult learners, as one-size-fits-all philosophy has long been abandoned. Similarly, feedback and support should be ongoing throughout the programme, accompanied by post-evaluation.

The design principles, exchange of good teaching practices, collaboration and critical reflective thinking along with positive attitudes' change are all in line with the European Framework for the Digital Competences of Educators (Redecker & Punie, 2017), elucidating

that, regardless of previous experience or digital proficiency level, all teachers can greatly co-operate to use ubiquitous technologies for their own CPD and their learners' needs. The role of the e-moderator as designer, facilitator, co-ordinator and feedback provider is catalytic for orchestrating viable and sustainable learning environment.

In terms of suggestions, regarding the pedagogical framework, one could propose that an adapted blended learning framework, with possibly two face-to-face workshops at a local base, could assist micro-teaching options or even peer-observation procedures. Likewise, Panagiotakopoulos, Lionarakis, & Xenos (2003) assert that physical proximity enhances the community feeling. Additionally, celebrating the great geographical distribution of the participants, a future introduction of webinar option or web conferences could enhance interconnectedness.

Having discussed the aforementioned limitations and constraints, we believe that ongoing, e-learning programmes fostering a reflective extended community need to be designed, covering more modules, geographical areas and EFL teachers, possibly incorporating a number of e-moderators/coordinators interacting in tandem. First and foremost, the majority of the participants confirmed their willingness to continue collaborating, perhaps on a less time-pressing schedule. Finally, it is suggested that a form of accreditation could be offered, not as extrinsic motivation, but as a kind reminder of an online learning experience.

When asked about the difference between the present and previous learning experiences, participants were all extremely generous in their comments. Citing a participant: "*practical ideas, tested in a classroom setting, not just random teaching scenarios*". Another one wrote: "*it gave you the feeling of being able to reach out and get loads of teaching tools, that can be different, interesting and effective*".

Concluding remarks

Regardless of the limitations and the weaknesses of the present small-scale study, most of our findings accord with earlier Greek and international studies, for the need of re-examining the status quo of foreign language INSET programmes by cultivating regional/national e-learning CoPs, leading teachers from different generations, voluntarily face the challenge of espousing new media pedagogies and technologies. Citing one participant: "*It did not feel like a class. It was peers learning from one another*". This comment highlights the fact that teachers can be inspired to develop a more holistic, pedagogical approach to TELL in an informal, supportive, job-embedded CoP. We cannot stress enough that this is not a requiem. Online CPD programmes supplement; they do not eradicate face-to-face seminars. Nevertheless, twenty-first century pedagogy necessitates multiple digital competences required for European and global educators.

The complexity of the new learning constructs and the interplay of online and face-to-face learning cannot be easily dismissed. However, our learners have long made these decisions for us, as digital technologies can aid us bring motivation and authenticity in our language lessons, opening up our classrooms to the world and welcoming the 'real' world to our classrooms. Reflecting the truth, we embarked to investigate, Hockly & Clandfield (2010, p. 3) posit "*Teaching online is not the future anymore. It is an important part of the language teaching education*".

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