



MALAYSIAN JOURNAL OF LEARNING AND INSTRUCTION

<https://e-journal.uum.edu.my/index.php/mjli>

How to cite this article:

V. Maniam., Tay Gerard., Harrington, I., Tranchard, H., Bennett, S., & Susan Bennett. (2025). Enhancing professional development through international collaborative dialogue: A study of Malaysian and Australian pre-service teachers. *Malaysian Journal of learning and Instruction*, 22(1), 23-39. <https://doi.org/10.32890/mjli2025.22.1.2>

ENHANCING PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT THROUGH INTERNATIONAL COLLABORATIVE DIALOGUE: A STUDY OF MALAYSIAN AND AUSTRALIAN PRE-SERVICE TEACHERS

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Received: 3/8/2023

Revised: 8/5/2024

Accepted: 23/6/2024

Published: 31/1/2025

ABSTRACT

Purpose - Despite the comprehensive nature of pre-service teacher training programs in Malaysia, the first year of teaching remains a challenging period for novice educators. Effective practices to support the transition to professional life is therefore crucial for teacher retention. This paper presents findings from a prospective study of an ongoing project model developed collaboratively by academics from an Australian public university and a Malaysian public teacher education provider. Together, they facilitated a series of international, dialogue-focused workshops designed to foster collaboration and conversation between Malaysian and Australian pre-service teachers.

Methodology - Pre-service teachers from Australia and Malaysia identified key areas of concern within their respective educational systems. Through virtual classroom sessions, they collaboratively discussed these issues and shared strategies for addressing them. Employing a qualitative approach, the project conducted semi-structured interviews with 10 Malaysian pre-service teachers to explore their participation in the virtual dialogues. The interviews also examined the participants' key takeaways, classroom teaching applications, and the challenges of engaging in online discussions.

Findings - Analysis of the interview data revealed six key themes: (1) Games in the Classroom, (2) Inclusive Mindsets, (3) Planning in Teaching and Learning, (4) Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC), (5) International and Comparative Education, and (6) Workshop Sustainability.

Significance - This study highlights the potential of the online collaborative project model to enhance pre-service teachers' international collaboration skills. It underscores the model's value as a sustainable professional development tool and a supportive framework for easing the transition to professional teaching.

Keywords: Pre-service teacher, teacher training, Malaysia, Australia.

INTRODUCTION

In the Asia Pacific region, there is a strong emphasis on fostering collaboration in education and creating professional learning communities to enhance professional development (Pang & Wang, 2016). Within the Malaysian context, higher education providers have historically engaged in various international collaboration projects (Tham & Kam, 2008). Additionally, there is a global drive among Asia Pacific countries, including Malaysia, to excel in international benchmarks such as the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) and Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS). Achieving success in these programs requires collaboration between developed and developing countries. Specifically, countries like Australia, Japan, Singapore, Taiwan and South Korea are called upon to play pivotal roles in supporting the educational advancement of developing countries within the region (Daniel, 2013; Sellar & Lingard, 2013; Wang & Pang, 2016). However, academics such as Sriprakash (2022), and Takayama (2017) have emphasised the importance of acknowledging the local knowledge produced with these developing populations during such engagements. This local knowledge should not only be valued and respected but also integrated into the learning processes of developed countries. By doing so, cross-cultural collaboration is fostered, enriching the education systems of both developed and developing countries (Takayama et al., 2016).

International cross-cultural dialogues provide significant benefits for pre-service teachers, helping them to better prepare and plan while improving their personal and professional confidence and fostering collaborative relationships (Parker et al., 2022; Moorhouse, 2020; Uusimaki & Swirski, 2014). Numerous international studies highlight the substantial advantages of promoting professional development for pre-service teachers through global cross-cultural interactions (Daniel, 2013; Moorhouse, 2020; Parker et al., 2022; Uusimaki & Swirski, 2014). These studies reveal that engaging in dialogue about teaching and learning across different countries, while respecting diverse cultural perspectives, allows pre-service teachers to exchange valuable ideas and insights (Parker et al., 2022; Moorhouse, 2020). In the Australian context, an empirical study on teacher professional development across six schools in Queensland reported that sustained professional development—focused on “engaging with the content of educational reform, participating in robust reflection about their practice and collaborating in substantive communities of learners” enhanced teachers’ ability to adopt cooperative, critical, reflective and student-centred teaching and learning practices (Hardy, 2010, p. 71). In Southeast Asia, educational research often emphasises the “development of teacher education” for both pre-service and in-service teachers. Enhancing teacher education not only improves its overall quality but also ensures that professional development courses empower teachers in this region to contribute effectively to their country’s educational “endeavours and “goals” (Saat et al., 2020).

It is widely recognised that the first year of teaching is particularly stressful for Malaysian novice teachers (Amzat et al., 2021; Darling-Hammond, 2010; Senom et al., 2013; Smith & Ingersoll, 2004; Zulkifli et al., 2022; Zakaria et al., 2016). Despite the provision of comprehensive pre-service teacher

training programs, many Malaysian novice teachers find their first year in the profession exceptionally challenging (Senom et al., 2013, p. 682). As Smith and Ingersoll (2004, p. 682) observe “critics have long assailed teaching as an occupation that cannibalizes its young, in which the initiation of new teachers is akin to a ‘sink or swim’, ‘trial by fire’, or ‘boot camp’ experience.” For many Malaysian novice teachers, the transition from pre-service teaching to full-time teaching is overwhelming. They are expected to immediately shoulder the full pedagogical and legislative responsibilities of their role, often without sufficient practical experience. This abrupt transition presents persistent challenges, including adjusting to full-time teaching, managing classrooms, establishing a professional identity, and building productive relationships with colleagues (Smith & Ingersoll, 2004). Other issues include adapting to the school community, effectively applying newly acquired knowledge and skills in teaching and learning management, handling classroom and co-curriculum responsibilities, and developing both personal confidence and professional credibility in the classroom (Darling-Hammond, 2010).

The inclusion of “Australia’s Engagement with Asia” in the Australian national educational curriculum (Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority [ACARA], 2020) encouraged teachers to integrate concepts related to Asia and its diversity into their teaching. This initiative emphasised the achievements and contributions of the peoples of Asia, as well as Asia – Australia engagement. These themes were to be embedded across all learning areas of the Australian Curriculum including English, Mathematics, Science, Humanities and Social Sciences, Technology, and Health and Physical Education (ACARA, 2021). To achieve this objective, Australian teachers and pre-service teachers needed to deepen their knowledge of Asia by increasing their engagement and collaboration with Australian teacher education providers. This initiative created opportunities for Australian pre-service teachers to engage in dialogue with their fellow pre-service teachers in Asia, enabling them to gain valuable insights into the Asian educational sector, and incorporate new ideas into their classroom practices (Fozdar, 2016; Gou, 2021; Haydn & Pietsch, 2012; He, 2011; Henderson, 2020; Ibrahim et al., 2020). Such symbiotic dialogues assisted Australian in-service and pre-service teachers in achieving the goals set by the Australian Professional Standards for Teachers (Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership [AITSL], 2018). The AITSL standards focuses on three domains: “Professional Knowledge, Professional Practice, and Professional Engagement” (AITSL, 2018, p. 4). Within the domain of Professional Engagement, teachers are encouraged to engage in professional learning alongside “colleagues, parents/carers, and the community” (AITSL, 2018, p. 4).

This study stems from a symbiotic and collegial academic and research partnership between Australia and Malaysia, established in 2020. This ongoing collaboration has facilitated the reciprocal exchange of students between the two countries. Notably, Malaysian students participated in the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) New Colombo Plan Mobility scholarship program in Australia from the 1950s to the early 1980s (Oakman, 2010). In addition, Australia has long been a preferred destination for Malaysian education students, “with more than 300,000 Malaysian students having studied in Australia” (Australian High Commission Malaysia, n.d.). The introduction of the DFAT New Colombo Mobility Plan has also enabled Australian students to travel to Malaysia, providing them with opportunities to gain knowledge and immerse themselves in cultural traditions within an Asian context. Since 2019, 26 Australian pre-service teachers from the University of New England have visited Malaysian primary and secondary schools, as well as higher education institutions, to learn from and collaborate with local Malaysian teachers.

CONTEXT OF THE STUDY

The project aimed to upskill and empower Malaysian pre-service English language teachers by fostering their professional development through a practical online and sustainable peer development resource focused on best practices. To achieve this, the researchers hosted four collaborative dialogue workshops conducted via the online platform Zoom, involving 10 Malaysian and 10 Australian pre-service teachers. The researchers acted as facilitators, responsible for organising, introducing, and moderating the dialogues. Before the workshop series began, participants completed an online survey to identify their preferred dialogue topics. The survey listed eight dialogue topics, which participants ranked according to their priorities. The top-ranked topic was *Using games in the classroom* as their first choice, followed by *Working with children from different backgrounds*. The third choice was *All learners are language learners – All teachers are language teachers*, while the researchers proposed that the fourth dialogue topic should be titled *Pulling it all together*. During the four workshops, participants engaged in small group activities that involved solving real teaching scenarios, exploring practicalities, reflecting on past and current practices, consolidating a variety of strategies, and gaining new ideas and knowledge.

The workshops were structured around guiding questions to facilitate meaningful dialogue among the participants. In the first workshop, *Using Games in the Classroom*, the discussion was guided by three questions: (1) Why do you use games in your classroom? (2) When do you use games in your classroom? and (3) What issues have you encountered? The second workshop, *Working with children from different backgrounds*, centred on a broader question: Who do you include in the students from diverse backgrounds category? The third workshop, *All learners are language learners – All teachers are language teachers*, was guided by three questions: (1) Why are language skills essential to your students? (2) What strategies do you use to support your students in developing their language skills, including subject-specific language? and (3) What issues have you encountered?

At the end of the workshops, participants were invited to take part in a post-workshop evaluation interview. This evaluation aimed to achieve three objectives: (1) Document the project's activities and development, (2) Assess the project's impact on participants' awareness and learning, and (3) Identify successes, challenges, and opportunities for continuous improvement.

The following section presents the literature review, highlighting the significance of this project. While the initiative aimed to foster dialogue between Malaysian and Australian pre-service teachers, this article focuses specifically on Malaysian pre-service teachers. Accordingly, the literature review concentrates on the Malaysian context, exploring several key areas: pre-service teacher training in Malaysia, the *Malaysia Education Blueprint 2013–2025*, the *English Language Education Roadmap 2015–2025*, teacher well-being in Malaysia, challenges faced by Malaysian novice teachers, and teacher professional development.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Pre-service teacher training in Malaysia

Pre-service teacher training in Malaysia has a long history, originating during the British rule of Malaya and evolving into its contemporary form (Kee & Hong, 1975). Today, Malaysia boasts one of the most robust teacher education programs in the Asia-Pacific region, offered by most Malaysian public and

private higher education institutions. Despite this, research on Malaysian pre-service teachers has been relatively limited over the past decade. A study by Goh and Blake (2015) identified three critical changes necessary to enhance teacher preparation and transform Malaysia's teacher education: (1) Developing a curriculum grounded in the Malaysian context, (2) Improving the practicum experience for pre-service teachers, and (3) Strengthening the development of teaching practices in schools. Further, a study by Goh and Matthews (2011, p. 12) identified four key concerns raised by pre-service teachers during their practicum, including "(a) Classroom management and student discipline; (b) Institutional and personal adjustment; (c) Classroom teaching; and (d) Student learning". Another study by Goh and Wong (2014, p. 77) investigated the competency of Malaysian novice teachers, particularly "their actions and decision-making with regards to their work". The findings emphasised the need for teacher education programs in Malaysia to create opportunities for pre-service teachers to become "active, critical and progressive thinkers" (p. 78).

Malaysia Education Blueprint 2013–2025 and the English Language Education Roadmap 2015–2025

The Malaysian Ministry of Education (MoE) developed and published the comprehensive *Malaysia Education Blueprint 2013–2025* (MEB) to address the stagnant state of the national education system (MoE, 2013). This framework outlines a transformative vision for the future of Malaysian education, emphasising the need to elevate academic achievement for all students. To achieve this transformation, the MEB focused on improving the quality of teaching and learning in classrooms. Educators were encouraged to adopt the latest pedagogical innovations, integrate advanced curricula, and assessments, and leverage technological advancements. By embracing these adaptations, Malaysian educators were better able to equip students with the skills necessary to thrive in the 21st century. Additionally, the MEB focused on "upgrading the quality and personalisation" of continuing professional development for teachers. It also sought to foster a "peer-led culture of excellence" encouraging educators to support and learn from one another in a collaborative environment (MoE, 2013).

In addition to the MEB, the MoE also released *English Language Education Reform in Malaysia: The Roadmap 2015–2025* (The Roadmap). This document provides a comprehensive framework for improving students' English language proficiency across primary, secondary, and higher education levels. Chapter nine of The Roadmap focuses specifically on teacher education, the need for Malaysian pre-service and in-service teachers to possess "high-quality" English language teaching skills. To achieve this goal, The Roadmap offers a range of recommendations related to curriculum design, teaching methodologies, and assessment practices (MoE, 2015). Several of these recommendations are particularly relevant to the objectives of this study, including: "Aligning professional programs to international standards"; "Selecting an independent international body to carry out benchmarking and measure the impact of pre-service English Language Teacher Education (ELTE) on teacher and student performance"; "Benchmarking teacher performance at the pre-service level against international standards"; "Reviewing the curriculum"; to ensure alignment with contemporary educational needs and "Implementing student-centred methodologies" to enhance teaching and learning outcomes (MoE, 2015, pp. 296–299).

To date, limited empirical research has been conducted relating to the MEB, and research related to The Roadmap is almost non-existent. Among the studies available, Zaman (2019) investigated the representation of the English language in the MEB. The study revealed that the blueprint acknowledges the importance of English language use among Malaysian students. It also recognised the efforts of English language teachers in implementing strategies to improve students' English language

proficiency. However, these teachers were not recognised as “equals, partners or policymakers” in the planning and decision-making processes (Zaman, 2019, pp. 8). Another study by Jeyaraj and Harland (2019) investigated the potential of critical pedagogy to achieve the objectives outlined in the MEB. The study recommended integrating critical pedagogy across the Malaysian curriculum, along with changes to “prevailing cultural norms, the strict social order,” and the political direction of education in Malaysia (Jeyaraj & Harland, 2019, p. 13). Salleh and Hatta (2017) examined “best practices” in promoting teacher professional development among principals and teachers in cluster secondary schools within the framework of the MEB. This study encouraged teachers to share their classroom teaching experiences with colleagues, which not only facilitates the exchange of pedagogical ideas but also contributed to improved student academic outcomes (Salleh & Hatta, 2017).

Malaysian Novice Teachers and Teacher Professional Development in Malaysia

Research by Senom et al. (2013) highlights that teacher professional development in Malaysia often comprises “traditional” approaches such as “workshops, seminars, courses and conferences” (Senom et al., 2013, pp. 124). While these methods are still commonly used, they are considered less effective in today’s innovative and technologically advanced teacher education programs (Hunzicker, 2011; Senom et al., 2013). A shift in pre-service teacher training is needed, focusing on the idea that “effective professional development is anything that engages teachers in learning activities that are supportive, job-embedded, instructional-focused, collaborative and ongoing” (Hunzicker, 2011, pp. 177).

Implementing a more “self-directed, collaborative and inquiry-based approach to professional development” in Malaysia (Senom et al., 2013, pp. 124) would provide teachers with a framework that recognises the value of informal social and professional networks. Senom et al. (2013) also suggests that Malaysian teacher education providers should actively engage in international networks. Such networks would offer opportunities for international peer engagement, enabling Malaysian teachers to collaborate on topics where they require support as they transition to professional teaching roles. A study conducted by Rashid et al. (2017) focused on policy reform and English language teaching in Malaysia reviewed “formal professional development programmes” for teachers. It concluded that “Malaysian teachers are not always given adequate and continuous support to cope with ongoing reforms.” New initiatives frequently fail to achieve their objectives due to the absence of “social support and guidance” and the additional burden of increasing teaching and administration duties. This lack of ongoing professional development exacerbates these challenges, leaving teachers ill-equipped to effectively implement reforms (Rashid et al., 2017, pp.100–109).

This project provided Malaysian pre-service/graduate teachers with the opportunity to engage in cross-cultural dialogues with their Australian counterparts. These dialogues aimed to enhance teaching capabilities, confidence and performance. While the project’s broader research framework included Australian pre-service teachers engaging in dialogues with Malaysian pre-service teachers, this paper specifically investigates the impact of these dialogues on the Malaysian pre-service teacher cohort.

METHODOLOGY

The researchers secured ethical approval for the project from the Malaysian Ministry of Education (KP: 690915075651) and the ethics committee of the participating Australian university (HE21-010). A semi-structured interview design was chosen for its feasibility and effectiveness, as the open-ended questions and ensuing topic-specific discussions offered rich, in-depth data (Cohen et al., 2018). The

semi-structured interview schedule comprised four key items: (1) What are the five essential takeaways from this dialogue? (2) Describe how this dialogue will help you in future classroom teaching applications, such as curriculum, assessment, and teaching methods. (3) Describe your experience and any challenges faced while participating in the online Zoom dialogue sessions. (4) Do you have any additional comments? Following the conclusion of the four workshop dialogues, individual interviews with the pre-service teachers were conducted via Zoom or telephone. Each interview lasted approximately 15 to 20 minutes. These interviews were recorded and fully transcribed, with the researchers employing a member-checking method to ensure accuracy. This process allowed participants to review their responses and make adjustments, ensuring that their perspectives were represented accurately (McGrath et al., 2019). The combination of semi-structured interviews and workshop dialogues provided the researchers with valuable insights, enabling a better understanding of the data within its specific context.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This paper focuses solely on the interviews of the Malaysian participants, highlighting the benefits of dialogue as a form of professional development rather than comparing knowledge or proficiency in pedagogical approaches between the two cohorts. All 10 Malaysian participants were interviewed via Zoom and provided comprehensive responses to each of the four questions. The interviews were conducted in English, as all participants demonstrated excellent English language proficiency. The NVivo coding analysis of the interview data revealed six key themes: (1) Games in the Classroom, (2) Inclusive Mindsets, (3) Planning in Teaching and Learning, (4) Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC), (5) International and Comparative Education, and (6) Workshop Sustainability. Each theme is discussed in detail below, supported by relevant literature and participants' comments.

Games in the Classroom

The project found that incorporating games in teaching was the most popular learning theme among the Malaysian pre-service teachers. Participants shared and gained valuable insights into how games could serve as an effective learning tool in the classroom.

I never thought I would use games in the classroom, but I will try now – it was good to also explore some of the difficulties playing games can create! I enjoyed listening to everyone's ideas. (Student Teacher: 03)

It was just interesting to listen to everyone sharing their experience and expertise – that was great! I will try some games in my next session. (Student Teacher: 01)

I got some great ideas on games I can use in my classroom to lighten things up. (Student Teacher: 07)

All participants expressed an interest in exploring how they could use games more creatively as a teaching tool. The workshops helped them see games as an effective method for both learning and assessment—an approach some had previously overlooked.

The [sessions] were an eye opener on how we can use games. I have seen people use games as teaching, but I have rarely seen people use games as a form of

assessment. I can now use games for assessment and know it's not wrong. (Student Teacher: 05)

A recent Australian study by Gutierrez et al. (2023) emphasised that professional development instruction is essential for successfully implementing games as a learning tool in classrooms. The sessions provided in this project deepened participants' understanding of how to effectively use games in the classroom sparking further discussions about the practical implementation of game-based approaches. The following dialogue illustrates the immense value of collaborative international exchanges for professional development.

I learned from the Australian participants, some of whom have classroom teaching experience, that games can be a very useful tool for teaching. However, they did mention that games need to be carefully designed because they may not always work well, especially for inexperienced teachers. I also gained creative and practical ideas, like using online games and language board games to encourage active participation among students, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic. (Student Teacher: 08)

Loved how the games session highlighted the differences between the two countries, and how important those differences are. (Teacher: 10).

Research supports the participants' experiences. For example, Liu et al. (2021) found that the use of games in the classroom positively impacts teacher engagement and student learning outcomes. Similarly, Arztmann et al. (2023) reported that game-based learning interventions in traditional classrooms enhanced students' "cognition, motivation, and behaviour" (p. 119).

Inclusive Mindsets

Promoting an inclusive education mindset is a globally significant goal that directly influences school-based policies and practices. Such a mindset empowers individuals with the skills, beliefs, and behaviours to foster inclusivity in meaningful and impactful ways. Most importantly, it empowers individuals to stand up for others, even when doing so might expose them to stigma or social ridicule (Harrington, 2013). In the context of Malaysia and other parts of Southeast Asia, inclusive education remains a relatively new and evolving concept (Low et al., 2018). The dialogue sessions provided participants with a platform to explore how they might adopt and embed this mindset in their future professional practice.

[I gained] knowledge, especially on inclusive education. Inclusive education is new here in Malaysia, and we are not used to it yet. The experience of talking to the teachers in Australia who have lots of prior experiences, and they shared their tips on how to handle it, has helped me a lot. (Student Teacher: 05)

We are not used to [inclusive education], it is not only new here, and it is very new. There are not many schools who are involved in inclusive education here in Malaysia, so this was a good experience for me. (Student Teacher: 01)

I gained a bigger appreciation for how large and complicated the area of inclusive education is (Student Teacher: 10)

In Malaysia, limited collaboration between general teachers and special education teachers often hinders the successful implementation of inclusive education programs (Warren et al., 2021). Some participants acknowledged that while inclusion represents best practice, the practical challenges in classrooms make full inclusion difficult to achieve.

Inclusion is the best practice; however, [in Malaysia] a 100% inclusion classroom is not always feasible. (Student Teacher: 10)

Despite these challenges, the dialogue sessions provided participants with valuable strategies and insights to inform their future teaching practices.

For inclusion ... we discussed special needs and high proficiency. We explained different activities, things like remedial and enrichment [activities]. These things were very good for me to know when I become a teacher. (Student Teacher: 06)

Planning in Teaching and Learning

The theme of teaching and learning was a central topic of interest for Malaysian pre-service teachers. The dialogue sessions offered an opportunity to build upon their existing training, introducing fresh, innovative ideas grounded in 21st-century teaching and learning literature and pedagogy (Kim et al., 2019). These discussions also encouraged the exploration of broader areas of learning.

One of the essential takeaways from these dialogue sessions is the knowledge on applying different teaching applications and techniques in the primary classrooms to enhance 21st-century teaching and learning among the students in both countries. (Student Teacher: 08)

This has honestly been helpful in terms of the assessment and the teaching methods. I am a new teacher. I don't have that many experiences yet, so having a chance to join a dialogue with people who have a wider experience [was] especially useful for assessment. (Student Teacher: 05)

An Australian study reported that pre-service language teachers benefit significantly from seeking teaching knowledge beyond their subject area, fostering innovation and creativity in areas such as language teaching pedagogy (Fenwick et al., 2014). This sentiment was echoed by a Malaysian participant who appreciated the broader scope of discussions:

Normally, I am only involved in dialogue pertaining to English language teaching. Through these sessions I was able to see education in a wider scope, and not just about English language teaching. There were many other subjects involved, like teachers that teach science and maths, and these are very different. Different teaching subjects have a different style, and this is a good thing in itself. This has made me think about how it can be used. (Student Teacher: 08)

These reflections highlight the critical role of collegial and collaborative dialogue in supporting professional development through social and professional networks. The benefits of such interactions are well-documented in the literature (Aeria et al., 2018; Sims et al., 2021; Trust et al., 2016).

Computer-Mediated Communication

The findings of previous studies underscore the numerous benefits of computer-mediated communication (CMC) in teaching and learning within higher education contexts (Howell, 2012; Mahdi, 2014; Ragusa, 2017). Studies focusing on Malaysian pre-service teachers' attitudes and approaches to information technology, online discussions and collaborative participation have consistently highlighted the advantages of IT as a tool for fostering collaborative work, exchanging ideas and solving problems (Fook et al., 2011; Ghadirian et al., 2018; Luan et al., 2006). A recent study by Sandoval-Cruz et al. (2020, p. 168) among pre-service teachers demonstrated that CMC-based online discussion forums are effective platforms for sharing thoughts and building collaborative knowledge while improving critical engagement and peer support. In the context of this study, Malaysian pre-service teachers were empowered through their participation in collaborative discussions where they explored a wide range of topics and teaching strategies. The dialogue sessions promoted both group and individual discussions. One challenge anticipated by the research team was addressing Malaysian language confidence and the reserved nature of some participants, particularly when participating in two-way discussions, especially with unfamiliar individuals. To mitigate these challenges, the researchers incorporated scenarios and mixed group breakout rooms as a key strategy. This approach successfully created a supportive environment for open and productive discussions. Feedback from participants confirmed the effectiveness of these methods: *"The scenarios and groups were a good way to get people focused and talking."* (Student Teacher: 09) and *"I liked the groups, especially in trying to get everyone to say something."* (Student Teacher: 04). The use of the breakout rooms in the CMC methodology facilitated communication and discussions.

While the CMC approach was positively received for its collaborative and inclusive nature, participants faced significant barriers related to internet accessibility. Despite their enthusiasm and willingness to participate in the online sessions, all Malaysian pre-service teachers encountered issues with poor internet connectivity. These technical challenges disrupted the flow of discussions and hindered the overall quality of learning experiences. For some participants, the difficulties were directly linked to their home environments, where unstable signals posed a major obstacle. *"The connection at our place was unstable; the line also was not smooth and broke in the middle of the sessions."* (Student Teacher: 08). Connectivity issues were acknowledged across the cohort, with participants recognising the critical role of reliable internet for CMC-based learning. One student reflected on how these challenges impacted the practicality of the CMC approaches:

Of course, when we talk about online interaction, internet connection will always be the most crucial element, which sometimes I have a weak internet connection and need to refresh to join the dialogue again. (Student Teacher: 03)

Affordability related to bandwidth levels and data quota plans emerged as another significant barrier to engagement for some participants: *"Internet connection stability and limited quota is what ultimately set me back from participating fully."* (Student Teacher: 01). To address these barriers, some participants relied on their campus's internet provision. However, issues with connectivity persisted:

When we were at college, the WIFI was so bad we shared laptops. (Student Teacher: 06)

When I was at home it was no problem, but when we were at college the WIFI was so bad and we shared laptops. (Student Teacher: 07)

Unfortunately, the WIFI connection in our campus is bad and I am worried a couple of times in our dialogue sessions, I may lose connection. (Student Teacher: 10)

These findings align with findings by Cullinan et al. (2021), who highlighted the barriers faced by higher education students during the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly issues with reliable internet access for learning online. Without stable internet connectivity, students struggled to engage effectively in their learning, indicating the importance of ensuring reliable infrastructure and proactive strategies to support engagement in CMC. Although participants expressed frustration with their campus internet, it is worth noting that previous research, such as the study by Fook et al. (2011), reported that Malaysian pre-service teachers are generally well-prepared in ICT skills. Despite this, many identified inadequate “facilities and technical malfunctions” at their placement schools as obstacles preventing them from applying their ICT skills during practicum teaching. This suggests that issues with internet connectivity extend beyond individual campuses to a wider range of educational institutions.

International and Comparative Education

Balakrishnan (2019) highlights that collaboration in international and comparative education between Malaysia and other countries could significantly benefit the Malaysian education reform agenda advocated in the MEB. Exposure to international and comparative education is essential for pre-service teachers to remain current and responsive to the needs of 21st-century learners (Rodwell, 2020). This exposure is particularly important for gaining insight into different educational systems, policies and curricula. However, many teacher education providers focus heavily on local issues and contexts in their syllabi, limiting opportunities for broader comparative engagement (Rodwell, 2020). The Malaysian pre-service teachers indicated a strong alignment with their local context, expressing an understanding of what their future roles, school culture, and expectations as Malaysian teachers would entail. Despite this local focus, all participants found the differences between the two educational systems a key learning point from the collaborative dialogues. Their positive engagement with these comparative perspectives is evident in the following reflections:

Both of the countries are multicultural but have a lot of differences. Being able to understand how it actually works [in Australia] helps, and it helped me in Malaysia because I was able to understand and articulate how it is here. (Student Teacher: 04)

We discussed the policies of Malaysia and Australia. The policies are two very different thing[s]. (Student Teacher: 06)

How different people in different countries prioritise the importance of different things in the same profession. (Student Teacher: 02)

While participants acknowledged differences between the two countries, many used the opportunity to reflect on their own education system. This process fostered an appreciation of the shared and unique challenges within their profession, broadening their view beyond an insular perspective. By identifying challenges shared across the profession and differences, participants were able to articulate their respective contexts more effectively. These insights support the inclusion of comparative education as a core undergraduate subject; although some higher education institutions incorporate comparative

education into their syllabi, it remains an exception rather than a standard practice (Meerah & Halim, 2013).

Workshop Sustainability

The Malaysian pre-service teachers expressed deep appreciation and empowerment from learning about the Australian context, especially in areas where practices differ from those in Malaysia. All participants expressed their desire for continued engagement, reflecting on the value of the experience and the potential for further exploration:

There are a lot more topics that we can explore. The topics were good, but there is more to discuss. The time given was not enough. Each topic was very big, and there were so many things we wanted to discuss. Inclusion is such a new and big topic, and there are so many more things I wanted to find out about and share. So maybe [future sessions] could be longer and maybe more topics. (Student Teacher: 10)

I greatly appreciate and am thankful for the opportunity given to us by participating in this teacher dialogue sessions to improve our teaching practices, especially to be implemented in this era of online and offline teaching modes. (Student Teacher: 08)

I think this is a great opportunity. I really hope that more teachers can be given the chance to be involved in this kind of dialogue, because it's good for their personal development and their professional development. If we have the chance, I would like to do this in a physical and face-to-face way—it is just human nature and I really love that. Doing it via online is good and helpful in many ways, and it eases communication no matter where we are, but being able to see each other in a physical form is better. (Student Teacher: 05)

The feedback above demonstrates the sustainability and desirability of international collaborative dialogue sessions as a valuable tool for professional development among Malaysian pre-service teachers. Their enthusiasm aligns with Salleh and Hatta (2017), who noted that encouraging dialogue among Malaysian teachers and their peers from other contexts helps to improve teaching practices and can positively influence student academic outcomes.

LIMITATIONS

This project aimed to gain an in-depth understanding of the topics discussed during the dialogue sessions. However, with a sample size of only 10 participants, the findings are not intended to be generalised quantitatively. Instead, the primary contribution of this study lies in providing insights into the impact and effectiveness of online professional development dialogue opportunities, particularly in supporting novice Malaysian teachers during the early stages of their professional practice. Additionally, the scope of this study was limited to exploring the experiences of Malaysian pre-service teachers. This focus was guided by a request from one of the participating education institutions to avoid direct comparisons between the Malaysian and Australian participants. The intention behind this was to ensure that the focus remained on the benefits of collaborative dialogue for professional development, rather than on evaluating or contrasting the pedagogical approaches or proficiency of the two cohorts.

CONCLUSION

The collaborative online sessions provided Malaysian pre-service teachers with their first opportunity to engage in international dialogues with their Australian peers. Feedback from the participants suggests that a greater level of self-directed, collaborative and inquiry-based approach to professional development can serve as an effective and sustainable form of teacher support. The group sessions fostered a deeper appreciation, broadened perspectives, and enhanced understanding of the elements constituting professional practice in Malaysia, facilitated through collaborative exploration of participant-driven pedagogical content. The self-directed nature of the online sessions enabled participants to reflect on their own teaching practices and explore strategies to improve their classroom effectiveness. Moreover, the participants indicated a strong willingness to continue these collaborative sessions in the future, underscoring the perceived value and sustainability of international peer dialogue. Beyond professional development, these sessions facilitated the creation of sustainable peer networks, offering both formal and informal support systems for novice teachers.

In the Malaysian context, this form of online professional teacher development can play an important role in supporting the goals of the MEB transformation (MoE, 2013) and The Roadmap (MoE, 2015). Furthermore, the project aligns with the vision of “Australia’s Engagement with Asia” (ACARA, 2020) and enriches the Professional Engagement domain of the Australian Professional Standards for Teachers (AITSL, 2018, p. 4).

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

This research was conducted without financial support from any public, commercial, or not-for-profit funding agencies.

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