

Professional Learning Communities: Learning Sites for Primary School English Language Teachers in Vietnam

PHAN QUYNH NHU

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Certificate of Authorship

I certify that the work in this thesis has not previously been submitted for a degree nor has it been submitted as part of requirements for a degree except as part of the collaborative doctoral degree and/or fully acknowledged within the text.

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Glossary

Demonstration lesson: refers to an English lesson on a chosen topic, which is delivered to primary school students and observed by all the participants in a professional learning community.

Demonstration teacher: refers to the teacher from a professional learning community who is delivering the demonstration lesson.

English as a foreign language (EFL): refers to English language learning in which the main source of English language input is mainly from teaching and learning inside classrooms, and the teacher plays a central role in the success of his or her students' English learning.

In-service teacher: refers to the teacher who has graduated from his or her teacher training program at university and college, and is currently teaching at an institution.

Microteaching: refers to the teacher's demonstration of a specific strategy or technique in teaching EFL; for example, microteaching a language game used as a warm-up activity.

Practicum: refers to the period when a pre-service teacher interns at a high school to learn and practise teaching, under the supervision of a high school teacher.

Pre-service teacher: refers to the student who is undergoing training to become a teacher in his or her formal teacher training programs at university or at college.

List of Abbreviations

CEFRL	Common European Framework of Reference for Languages
DOET	Department of Education and Training
EFL	English as a foreign language
ELT	English language teaching
MOET	Vietnam Ministry of Education and Training
BANA	Britain, Australasia and North America
Non-BANA	other countries than Britain, Australasia and North America
PLC	Professional learning community
PET	Primary school English language teacher
T	Teacher
TEYL	Teaching English to younger learners

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Abstract

The present qualitative case study set out to examine the processes of an innovative professional learning activity, known as professional learning communities (PLCs), which operated as learning sites for primary school English language teachers (PETs) in Thanh Van,* a city in Vietnam. A majority of the PETs were originally trained as secondary school English language teachers and therefore were grappling with the new demands of teaching in a primary setting. Their professional learning has been under-researched and so offered a unique opportunity for research into the ways the PLCs assisted (or not) in the PETs' development. A sociocultural perspective, which highlights the situatedness and interactiveness of teacher learning, was adopted as a theoretical lens to understand teacher learning in this particular context.

This study comprised two phases of data collection. The data included 10 observations of the meetings of four PLCs, 4 semi-structured interviews with three PLCs' leaders and an EFL consultant and 20 semi-structured interviews with seven PETs after observing their EFL lessons at primary schools. Thematic analysis with an iterative coding process was used to interpret the observations and interviews.

The research shows that the PLCs were recontextualised, incorporating not only common features of any teacher community as reviewed in literature but also unique features relevant to the particularities of the specific context. These particularities were evident in their formal structure, multilayered leadership and complex learning relationships. The findings clearly suggest that established as a top-down formal professional activity, the reshaped PLCs allowed for bottom-up professional learning. The PETs engaged in their learning process as active and thoughtful learners. Their learning was socially mediated through professional interactions in the PLCs, which promoted situated learning, peer learning and scaffolding among the participants. However, teachers' full participation was affected by some factors including insufficiently developed collegiality among teachers, cultural expectations on their social roles in leading professional learning

and time constraints. However, generally, the PETs and other stakeholders perceived the PLCs to be of benefit to teachers' knowledge and identity development and networking.

The study makes significant contributions to the knowledge about the role of PLCs in teachers' professional development, particularly within a context where this form of teacher learning is unfamiliar. The thesis makes a number of recommendations, which aim to strengthen the basis for collaborative learning amongst Vietnamese teachers and to suggest models of PLCs appropriate to the Vietnamese context.

* pseudonym

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CHAPTER 1: Introduction

1.1 Introduction

This chapter introduces the thesis and describes its significance. My interest in conducting an investigation into the professional learning communities (PLCs) for Vietnamese primary school English language teachers (PETs) stems from my concerns about how the PETs are managing their ongoing professional development in response to the government's new language policy (Ministry of Education and Training 2008). The new policy of lowering the starting age of learning English as a foreign language to year 3 in Vietnam has energised discussion around a number of controversial issues (Baldauf et al. 2011; Kaplan, Baldauf & Kamwangamalu 2011; Nunan 2003), of which the identified lack of qualified teachers has been the most serious.

A majority of in-service PETs in Vietnam have a low level of English language proficiency and were not trained to teach EFL at this level (Baldauf et al. 2011; Hayes 2008b; Moon 2005; Nguyen & Nguyen 2007). These teachers tend to use adult-oriented teaching methods to teach EFL to their primary school students (Le & Do 2012; Nguyen 2011; Nguyen 2012b). While it is requisite for these teachers to be retrained or retrain themselves to be able to teach EFL at their primary schools in a more appropriate way, professional learning opportunities for Vietnamese teachers in general and PETs in particular are still limited in scope and mainly conducted in one-off training courses or workshops and in a cascade approach (Hanamo 2008; Hayes 2008b; O'Neill 2002), and are unlikely to be beneficial to teachers' development (Nguyen 2011; Pham 2013). On the other hand, while collaboration has not traditionally been common among Vietnamese teachers (Le & Nguyen 2012; Pham 2001), collaborative professional learning has been recently introduced and according to many researchers in this area, the results of this initiative have been somewhat ambivalent (Le & Nguyen 2012; Nguyen 2016; Saito, Khong & Tsukui 2012; Saito & Tsukui 2008; Trinh & Laws 2010; Vo & Nguyen 2010). Seeking insights into the issues relating to the Vietnamese PETs' English language teaching and professional learning in turn requires a search for new and compelling evidence on the ways that collaborative

professional learning has been developed for and benefitted Vietnamese teachers, particularly the Vietnamese PETs. As will become clear later in this chapter, it is the teachers in this sector who are in greatest need and it is their professional learning that is so under-researched.

This chapter begins with a brief explanation of the problems relating to the new policy of lowering the starting age of learning a foreign language in Vietnam. The chapter also introduces some of the more challenging issues relating to professional learning for Vietnamese teachers, all of which will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 2. This section also outlines the gaps in literature that this research aims to fill. The chapter continues with the statement of the problem that this research focuses on, an explanation of the research aims and research questions, the theoretical framework and the significance of this study. The chapter concludes with an outline of the research approach adopted in this study and an overview of the thesis.

1.2 Background to the problem

Improving teacher and teaching quality and students' learning outcomes has been at the forefront of educational strategies in many countries (Sparks & Hirsh 2000; Thu Tuong Chinh Phu 2012). In 2008, the Vietnamese government introduced an important foreign language education project at the national level for the period of 2008-2020, which is known as Project 2020 (Ministry of Education and Training 2008). With this project, 10-year foreign language learning programs were set out for all Vietnamese students from Years 3-12, with English being the dominant foreign language learned due to its popularity in Vietnamese society (see Chapter 2). A wide body of literature has presented the view that the policy of lowering the starting age of learning a foreign language, specifically the English language in Vietnam and other Asian countries, has led to many unresolved problems (Baldauf et al. 2011; Kaplan & Baldauf 2007; Kaplan, Baldauf & Kamwangamalu 2011; Nunan 2003). It has been argued that this policy is largely political (Kaplan & Baldauf 2007), mainly based on the hypothesis that younger is better (Nunan 2003), and is resource-heavy while Vietnam and other countries still lack massive commitments of funds and teaching and teacher resources (Kaplan, Baldauf &

Kamwangamalu 2011) (see Chapter 2 for further discussion). Despite well-founded reservations, the new language policy has been developed and is being implemented in Vietnam. Being an educational researcher, I am particularly interested in the extent to which this policy succeeds.

While the availability of qualified personnel has been shown to be one of the key factors of a successful language policy (Kaplan, Baldauf & Kamwangamalu 2011), a majority of Vietnamese PETs were not trained to teach English as a foreign language (EFL) to younger learners, but to older learners (Baldauf et al. 2011; Hayes 2008b; Le & Do 2012; Moon 2005, 2009; Nguyen 2011; Nguyen & Nguyen 2007; Nunan 2003) and have low English language proficiency (Le & Do 2012; Moon 2009; Nunan 2003). Many of the PETs in rural primary schools had no knowledge of common language teaching methods (Nguyen 2012b). Therefore, they tended to use adult-oriented teaching methods and were not able to provide a good model of English to their students (Le & Do 2012; Moon 2009). This critical issue has led my research interest to focus on how the PETs from inappropriate training backgrounds have been retrained and/or retrained themselves in response to the demand that EFL will be taught as a compulsory subject from Year 3 at primary schools across Vietnam by the academic year 2018-2019. I started to ponder the questions: What professional learning activities have been conducted for Vietnamese PETs at national, provincial and school levels since the project 2020 developed? In what ways do the professional learning activities engage the PETs as learners? And how do they benefit the PETs' learning leading to their professional growth and transformations in their EFL teaching at primary schools?

Seeking answers to these questions, I started to review literature on the field of primary school EFL teaching and learning, and PETs' professional learning. In a wide body of literature discussing the controversial issues relating to the policy of lowering the starting age of learning a foreign language, specifically English language, in Asian countries and in Vietnam, only a small number of previous studies provided evidence on what professional learning opportunities are available to Vietnamese PETs and the ways that the PETs are likely to benefit from the learning activities (Nguyen 2016; Nguyen 2011; Pham 2013). However, none of these studies showed evidence of the outcomes of the process that Vietnamese

PETs engaged as learners in their professional learning activities. My research is the first study to offer an innovative account of the ways that Vietnamese PETs engage as learners and benefit from their professional learning activities.

Previous studies have shown a positive association between teacher professional learning and improvements in teachers' knowledge and teaching practice (e.g., Boyle, Lamprianou & Bolye 2005; Garet et al. 2001) and students' learning outcomes (e.g., Meiers & Ingvarson 2005; Timperley et al. 2007; Yoon et al. 2007). It is also true that the extent of changes in teachers' thinking, practice and students' outcomes depends on the kinds of professional learning activities that teachers engage in. Referring to the implementation of Vietnam's Project 2020, the challenges for Vietnam's Ministry of Education and Training (MOET) and Departments of Education and Training (DOETs) of the provinces across Vietnam lie in choosing appropriate types of professional learning activities for the PETs to learn to teach from their background of EFL secondary school teachers or of primary school teachers with no knowledge of EFL teaching methods.

The review of the literature undertaken for this thesis showed that professional learning activities for Vietnamese teachers in general and Vietnamese PETs in particular are mainly one-off training programs such as short training courses or workshops (Hanamo 2008; Hayes 2008b; Le & Nguyen 2012; Nguyen 2011; Pham 2013). Many of them are conducted in a cascade approach (Hanamo 2008; Hayes 2008b), which has been criticised for its challenges in passing knowledge or information to the next group of teachers or for teachers' little take-up for better classroom performance (Dichaba & Mokhele 2012; Hayes 2000). Commonly known as 'one-size-fits-all events' (Diaz-Maggioli 2003, p. 3), these learning activities, when being enacted, tend to be formally-delivered and theory-oriented. They are therefore 'unlikely to result in transformative professional learning for teachers' (Fraser et al. 2007, p. 165), have little input into classroom practices (Johnson 2006) and pay little attention to supporting continuous learning and changes in practice (Lieberman 1995). The benefits of the formal learning programs for Vietnamese teachers are therefore open to debate (see Chapter 2 for further discussion).

Following the precept of a sociocultural perspective that the boundaries of professional learning need to be redrawn in order to maximise its benefits (Johnson 2006), it should be acknowledged that effective professional learning activities expand beyond formal events such as training courses or workshops. From this perspective, professional learning activities are expected to ‘allow for self-directed, collaborative, inquiry-based learning’ and to be of more benefit to teacher learners than formal ones (Johnson 2006, p. 243), which would be definitely influenced by other factors in the education system, such as curriculum designers, parents, and administrators. Regarding these principles, a variety of innovative professional learning activities are suggested in a wide body of relevant literature (e.g., Aubusson, Ewing & Hoban 2009; Department of Education and Training 2005; Lieberman 1995; Richards & Farrell 2005). Teachers’ professional growth and transformations in teaching were reported when teachers engaged in the professional learning activities stimulating their collective participation (Boyle, Lamprianou & Bolye 2005; Desimone et al. 2002) and with a specific content focus (Ingvarson, Meiers & Beavis 2005; Yates 2007). However, Veen, Zwart and Meirink (2012) have claimed that more empirical evidence is still required to confirm the advantages of such innovative learning activities. This claim has inspired me, as a researcher, to contribute new evidence on self-directed, collaborative and inquiry-based professional learning in the Vietnamese context. It is therefore requisite to explore the benefits of interactions between the teachers and the other stakeholders within and outside the boundaries of their professional learning activities.

Self-directed, collaborative, and inquiry-based professional learning for teachers has only recently arrived in Vietnam and this area of research is still under-investigated. Ambivalent outcomes relating to the challenges and benefits of such innovative professional learning among Vietnamese teachers have been reported in a limited number of empirical studies (Cham 2013; Le & Nguyen 2012; Nguyen 2016; Saito, Khong & Tsukui 2012; Saito & Tsukui 2008; Vo & Nguyen 2010). It was found that it is challenging to develop a learning community or collaboration among Vietnamese teachers due to the lack of trust, professional interaction among colleagues, or teachers’ evaluation-oriented feedback (Le & Nguyen 2012;

Saito & Tsukui 2008; Saito, Tsukui & Tanaka 2008). Meanwhile, the findings of a small amount of other research suggest that learning among critical friends or in a community of practice helped improve Vietnamese teachers' performance and/or develop their professional identity (Cham 2013; Nguyen 2016; Trinh & Laws 2010; Vo & Nguyen 2010) (see Chapters 2 and 3 for further discussion). Among these studies, only Cham's (2013) study provided empirical evidence on the process in which Vietnamese EFL teachers within a Department at a university engaged and learned in their community in only eight weeks. Hence, the positive feedback from this limited number of studies might not be strongly persuasive to confirm the benefits of collaborative learning for Vietnamese teachers. The current study aims to provide more compelling empirical evidence on both the ways in which collaborative learning has been developed and the ways that it has benefitted Vietnamese teachers, particularly the Vietnamese primary school EFL teachers in Thanh Van (a pseudonym) for an extended period of time, since 2008.

One collaborative learning activity that originally comes from and has been widely researched in Britain, Australasia and North America, as termed BANA by Holliday (1994a) is the professional learning community (PLC) (Bolam et al. 2005; DuFour 2004; Hargreaves 2007; Stoll 2011; Stoll & Louis 2007). Other similar activities are communities of practice (Bairral 2007; Yildirim 2008), communities of enquiry (Cassidy et al. 2008; Christie et al. 2007), teacher communities (Grossman, Wineburg & Woolworth 2001; Westheimer 2008), or networking (Katz & Earl 2010). These activities share a common feature in that teachers jointly work towards a shared goal of improving their teaching and students' outcomes (DuFour 2004) and are given the opportunity to mediate the knowledge they are acquiring through discussion and ongoing collaboration. PLCs or similar activities conducted in different contexts incorporate different features, benefits or challenges relevant to their specific groups of teacher learners. In addition, according to Bolam et al. (2005), 'the practical implications for developing a professional learning community can be only understood and worked out in the specific conditions ... of particular contexts and settings' (p. i). Thus, this study complements previous studies on PLCs or similar collaborative learning activities conducted elsewhere, and contributes to the knowledge of more practical implications of developing a

professional learning community in the particular context of Thanh Van in Vietnam.

Regarding the Vietnamese context, only a limited number of previous studies investigated teacher learning of this type under different names such as a learning community (Saito, Khong & Tsukui 2012; Saito & Tsukui 2008), communities of practice (Cham 2013; Nguyen 2016) or international collaborative partnership (Trinh & Laws 2010). Trinh and Laws (2010) and Nguyen (2016) reported teachers' positive voices on their learning in their learning communities, but did not provide any evidence on the ways that the teachers' learning process had occurred. Also, Saito and Tsukui (2008) did not provide a detailed analysis of how primary school teachers had learned in their communities, but focused on their analysis of the challenges in developing a learning community within each of five primary schools in Bac Giang province, where an educational project between the Vietnamese government and Japan International Cooperation Agency was delivered on a large scale from 2004 to 2007. On a smaller scale, Cham's (2013) study reported the implementation of a community of practice program, which involved 25 EFL tertiary teachers within a Department in a Southern highland university in only eight weeks. Cham (2013) provided empirical evidence about the EFL teachers' engagement in their community from observational data. The interview data also reported the benefits of a community of practice program for the teachers and Department, and stakeholders' roles and recommendations in developing a community of practice. However, the analysis of the EFL teachers' engagement in Cham's (2013) study was limited simply to three dimensions of a community of practice, mutual engagement, shared enterprise and joint repertoire (Wenger 1998). These three dimensions seem to be inadequate to uncover the dynamic and complex nature of teacher learning (Johnson 2009). The Cham's (2013) study therefore failed to provide in-depth accounts of how the teachers' learning process occurred in that community.

To date, there has been no comprehensive study focusing on developing and implementing a professional learning community for Vietnamese teachers and on the ways that teachers' professional learning is allowed for in their community, particularly for Vietnamese PETs, who have a pressing need to learn to teach EFL

to their primary school students. These are the gaps in the literature that a study of the operation of professional learning communities (PLCs) for PETs in the context of Thanh Van with the use of observations of the PLCs' activities and interviews with their stakeholders, can address.

1.3 The statement of the problem

From the previous section it can be seen that more compelling evidence is needed on the question of how Vietnamese PETs have been learning to teach from their inappropriate training backgrounds in response to the demand that EFL will be taught as a compulsory subject from year 3 in primary schools across Vietnam (Ministry of Education and Training 2008). Their learning process needs exploring beyond the formal learning opportunities such as workshops and training courses, which seem to be more common, but of limited benefits to Vietnamese teachers. This study set out to investigate a previously unresearched collaborative learning activity, known as professional learning communities (PLCs), which have been established and implemented for Vietnamese PETs in Thanh Van since 2008.

Regarding the reluctance of Vietnamese teachers to engage in collaborative activities, as outlined in the previous section and in Chapter 2 (Le & Nguyen 2012; Pham 2001; Saito & Tsukui 2008) I started to ponder how the PLCs have been developed as learning sites for the PETs in Thanh Van and how they have allowed for teachers' collaborative learning since 2008. As the first of its kind in the Vietnamese context, this study aimed to collect empirical evidence on the process of the PLC's development and implementation and on the ways that the PETs constructed their knowledge and professional identity in the PLCs, which is then likely to result in possible changes in their practice.

Taking into account the principles of developing a PLC or other similar activities suggested in the literature, and Grossman, Wineburg and Woolworth's (2001) claim that no PLC can fit all contexts, I did not anticipate the concept of PLCs, which originally came from and have been widely studied in BANA countries, would be replicated in the Vietnamese context. Rather, the social, cultural and political features of the specific context of Thanh Van in Vietnam, where the PETs strongly need to learn in response to the demand of teaching EFL to their primary school

students, would influence formulating the features of these particular PLCs. The PLCs would be therefore reshaped to suit the PETs' particular ways of learning. For these reasons, it was important to identify what features the PLCs incorporate and in what ways the PLCs allow for their teachers' learning. The complexity of the PETs' learning in the PLCs was revealed through the lens of a sociocultural perspective on teacher learning and teacher knowledge.

1.4 The purpose of the study

This study came out of the quest for knowledge about how Vietnamese PETs have been learning to teach in response to the new language policy (Ministry of Education and Training 2008), and from the call for more empirical evidence on informal and collaborative professional learning in different contexts (Veen, Zwart & Meirink 2012), particularly the Vietnamese context where collaborative learning has not been common. For these reasons, this study aims to contribute innovative evidence on the Vietnamese PETs' learning process in informal and collaborative learning to current knowledge. The overall goal of this study was therefore to explore how a collaborative professional learning activity called *Sinh Hoạt Cộng Chuyên Môn* (*Participating in Professional Communities* – see Chapter 2) operated as learning sites for the PETs in Thanh Van. The term 'a professional learning community' (PLC) is used to refer to this professional activity (see Chapter 3). To be specific, I firstly aimed at finding out the particular features of a PLC in the context of Thanh Van. The second objective was to examine how the PLC activity facilitates the PETs' learning process when they have strong learning needs. Holding these two major aims, my study was guided by the following two research questions:

1. *What are the features of professional learning communities in Thanh Van in Vietnam?*
2. *In what ways do the professional learning communities support the learning process of primary school English language teachers in that city?*

1.5 Theoretical framework

A sociocultural perspective on teacher learning and teacher knowledge has shed light on the current study. From this perspective, teacher learning is considered as 'normative and life-long ... [and] as the result of participation in the social practices and contexts associated with learning and teaching' (Johnson 2009, p. 10). Teacher learning is a social endeavour, which is facilitated, developed and mediated through social interactions between teachers and others. Therefore, teachers are no longer seen as passive receivers of prescribed sets of knowledge for their practice, but 'users and creators of legitimate forms of knowledge who make decisions about how best to teach their students within complex socially, culturally and historically situated contexts' (Johnson 2006, p. 239). Put simply, teacher knowledge cannot be transferred from these contexts to others without any adaptation, but is embedded in very particular contexts of teaching and learning. Teacher knowledge and professional identity are not fixed, but continuously developed and socially constructed or mediated through social interactions that teachers are involved in (Johnson 2009; Johnson & Golombek 2011; Richards 2008; Sachs 2005).

From this perspective, it is argued that they are most likely to learn effectively in other learning opportunities available inside and outside their schools where they have the opportunity to interact professionally with others and where they are actively involved in the learning process (Johnson 2009). Therefore, it is understood that teachers' professional learning is not limited to pre-service teacher training programs delivered at university or college, or formal planned in-service teacher professional development programs. Teachers continue learning to construct their knowledge and identity after these training courses and while doing their teaching.

The epistemological stance of a sociocultural perspective on teacher learning and teacher knowledge offered me, as a researcher, an optimal theoretical lens to investigate the process through which the PETs learned. To be more specific, I adopted three key constructs of this perspective, including internalisation, mediation, and zone of proximal development (see Chapter 3), in order to uncover

the dynamic and complex nature of teacher learning in that collaborative learning activity. Taking a sociocultural perspective, this study also drew on the interactions between teacher learning and sociocultural features of its specific context to examine the situatedness of PETs' learning.

In addition to the lens of a sociocultural perspective, I employed Kumaravadivelu's (2012) innovative framework of language teacher education as an additional analytical framework in this study. Being developed from the three parameters of post-method pedagogy of second language learning – particularity, practicality and possibility (Kumaravadivelu 2001, 2006), a modular model targets training teachers to become 'self-determining and self-transforming individuals' (Kumaravadivelu 2012, p. 17) and 'to move away from transmission and work towards transformations' (p. 18). This framework includes five interconnected skills – knowing, analysing, recognising, doing and seeing. Although this module was developed for language teacher education, I found it relevant to my analysis of the PETs' learning in the PLCs. It offered me an innovative lens to uncover a range of skills, knowledge and senses that the PETs were able to draw on and develop in their learning process.

With the use of a sociocultural perspective on teacher learning as a theoretical framework and the key constructs of the perspective and Kumaravadivelu's (2012) modular module as analytical frameworks, the recounting of my study will provide unique insights into the process and outcomes of implementing PLCs as learning sites for Vietnamese PETs in the specific context of Thanh Van.

1.6 The significance of the study

The fourfold significance of this study can be highlighted as follows.

The primary significance of this study resides in the contributions it will make to the implementation of Vietnam's new language policy. As noted in the first section of this chapter, a majority of the Vietnamese PETs need additional training in response to the demand of teaching their students EFL as a compulsory subject from Year 3 at primary schools. Little research has been conducted about how the PETs learn to teach, particularly how they learn outside the formal training

programs for PETs, which have been conducted at the provincial and national level and the benefits of which are doubted (Nguyen 2011; Pham 2013). Evidence from this study about the potential benefits and challenges of developing PLCs as learning sites for Vietnamese PETs would be an important reference for MOET, DOETs and schools in different provinces in Vietnam in developing curricula and syllabi of professional learning for their PETs. These authorities may consider developing PLCs or similar collaborative learning activities along with the formal ones in order that Vietnamese PETs are able to gain full benefits from their professional learning and improve their practice; as a result of which, the new language policy is more likely to be successful.

Secondly, this study contributes empirical evidence to the scholarly knowledge of how Vietnamese teachers learn collaboratively with and from their colleagues. With the use of a sociocultural perspective on teacher learning as a theoretical framework and its constructs along with Kumaravadivelu's (2012) modular module on teacher education as analytical frameworks, this study offers an in-depth analysis of how Vietnamese teachers' knowledge is socially constructed and developed through mediational tools in the PLCs and how the teachers internalise their mediated knowledge in relation to the particularities of their teaching and decide on possible changes in their practice. This source of empirical evidence is valuable to confirm the contested viewpoints about collaborative learning in Vietnam and by the same token, significant to developing a model of collaborative learning for Vietnamese teachers. As a result, professional learning or development for Vietnamese teachers could expand the boundaries of formal professional learning activities, which have been argued to be of little benefit to teachers' development.

Third, this study is the first of its kind. PLCs have been implemented as learning sites for the PETs in Thanh Van since 2008, but there has been no research of their operations or effectiveness. Therefore, the study contributes unique insights into how the PLCs have operated learning sites for the PETs in that context. By the same token, the study adds to current knowledge about how the BANA concept of a PLC has been reshaped to fit the particular social, cultural and political features of the Vietnamese context and how the PLCs allow for professional learning of the

PETs who need to learn to teach primary school students. This close analysis of how the social, cultural and political features of a specific context affect the PLCs' implementation and shape the PLCs' particular features is a significant source of practical implications for developing a PLC in that particular context and in other similar settings in Vietnam and in other countries (Bolam et al. 2005).

Last but not least, this study contributes to the literature on teacher learning and the significance of a research methodology developed in response to cultural issues specific to the Vietnamese context. Gaining rich data on the PETs' learning in the PLCs for this study was a product of my developing research methodology in regard to the issues of institutional hierarchies and teachers' lack of collaborative culture. Multiple perspectives from different stakeholders including the leaders from the Department were essential to investigate Vietnamese teachers' learning. Teachers' engagement or learning needs to be understood beyond their overtly-seen active engagement; their 'silent' engagement must be traced, which can be discovered only through teachers' interviews or journals. Therefore, the research methodology adopted in this study can provide other educational researchers with a useful methodological framework to develop their research on teacher learning in other similar contexts in Vietnam.

1.7 Overview of methodology

The choice in research perspective and methods for this study was influenced by my stance on teacher learning. The epistemological stance of a sociocultural perspective supports the notion that teacher learning is a complex process and results from multiple social interactions between teachers and others (Johnson 2009). In this study, a qualitative case study approach was therefore adopted as an optimal tool to explore the complexity of teacher learning and to produce rich data on how the PETs learn in their communities. Providing a broad repertoire of possible interpretations of dynamic human experience, qualitative research allowed me to make sense of 'all possible social variables' of the PET's learning experience in the PLCs (Holliday 2007, p. 5). In addition, using a qualitative case study approach, I was able to investigate the PETs' learning 'in depth and in its real-life context' (Yin 2009, p. 18) with little control over what was happening in

their learning process. Data collection in this study was conducted in two phases with a seven-month interval. Through observations of the PLCs' meetings in their natural settings and interviews with the PETs, the PLC's leaders and EFL consultant about their experience in the PLCs, this study produced 'rich and in-depth insights [of complex and dynamic characteristics of the PLCs and PETs' learning experience in the PLCs] that no other method can yield' (Dörnyei 2007, p. 155).

Furthermore, the research methodology for this study was developed to fit specifically to the Vietnamese context embedded with a number of cultural issues that possibly influence Vietnamese teachers' learning. The issues, including institutional hierarchies of Department and schools (Hofstede, Hofstede & Minkov 2010), teachers' reluctance to speak openly in a community and limited trust among teachers (Le & Nguyen 2012; Saito & Tsukui 2008), were carefully considered in recruiting participants and designing data collection tools. The EFL consultant brought to the study valuable information on the implementation of the PLCs from the perspective of a leader at the departmental level. Interviews were used in conjunction with observation in order to discover PETs' 'silent' learning experience that was not overtly observed in the PLCs due to their reluctance to speak openly or limited trust.

Observational and interview data collected in two phases in this study were analysed following an inductive and iterative pattern of coding qualitative research data (Dörnyei 2007; Silverman 2014). Data analysis started after the first phase of collecting data and from the beginning of the second phase. The sense of a PLC's operation as learning sites for PETs and PETs' learning processes was made clear through the steps of familiarising and pre-coding the collected data with tentative and emerged categories in each of the two phases of data analysis. Then, three broad themes of PLC's operation, including *PLC's features*, *PLCs' affordances for teacher learning* and *participants' voices about the PLCs*, were developed to guide the steps of formal analysis of the data collected in the two phases.

1.8 Overview of the thesis

The thesis is organised in eight chapters. Chapter 1 is an introduction to the thesis and gives a rationale as to why this study is significant in the Vietnamese context and in knowledge of teacher learning. The study's aims and research questions, theoretical framework and research methodology are also briefly described in this chapter.

Chapter 2 provides the readers with a detailed account of the contextual background where the research is set. It outlines and discusses the practice of English language education, teacher education and teacher development in Vietnam. In particular, the problems of English language learning and teaching at primary school level in Vietnam are defined in order to highlight the significance of the study.

Chapter 3 is developed as a conceptual framework for this study. It has a dual purpose; one, to review the literature relevant to the present study and two, to identify the body of knowledge to which this study contributes. In reviewing literature in the field of teacher learning, I developed my assumptions about teacher learning. They are: professional learning is contextualised in its practice, teacher knowledge is socially constructed, but unique to each individual teacher; and mediation promotes teachers' professional growth. In this chapter, a rationale is given as to why the term professional learning rather than professional development is used in this study. In particular, this chapter presents in detail the theoretical framework of a sociocultural perspective and its constructs, which were employed as an analytical lens to investigate teacher learning in the PLCs.

Chapter 4 continues with the research methodology. It explains why a qualitative case study was highly relevant to this study, examining the complexity and uniqueness of the PLCs' operations and the PETs' learning in that particular setting. This chapter provides a detailed description of the research setting, participants, data collection tools, data collection procedures, and data analysis approaches. My role as an insider researcher and the validity of the findings are also addressed in this chapter.

The findings of the study are presented and analysed in Chapters 5 and 6 in correspondence to the two research questions. Chapter 5 presents an analysis of the findings on what features the PLCs in Thanh Van in Vietnam incorporate. Chapter 6 continues with the analysis of the findings on how the PLCs allow for professional learning among the PETs in their communities and the stakeholders' voices on the teachers' learning experience. As the analysis of the PLCs' features and teachers' learning needs considering in their context, the data is used across these two findings chapters.

Chapter 7 provides in-depth discussions on the key issues highlighted in the findings about the implementation of the PLCs and teacher learning embedded in the context of Thanh Van. The key issues do not neatly relate to the sections in the two findings chapters, but have emerged from the findings across both chapters. They are discussed in the light of a sociocultural perspective on teacher learning, in reference to the conceptual framework developed in Chapter 3 and from my understandings of the research setting as an insider researcher.

Chapter 8 summarises the research as a whole, highlighting the particularities of PLCs conducted in this city and the possible affordances for teacher learning in that particular context. In this chapter, implications for developing and implementing PLCs in similar contexts and promoting teachers' professional development or learning are suggested. Limitations of this study and directions for further research are also mapped out in this chapter.

1.9 Summary of the chapter

This chapter has provided an overall introduction to the whole thesis. The study was inspired by controversial issues relating to Vietnam's Project 2020, lowering the starting age of learning a foreign language to Year 3, and the call for empirical evidence on teacher collaborative learning. The outcomes of this study contribute potential benefits to the implementation of the new language policy, to scholarly knowledge, innovative evidence of collaborative learning for Vietnamese teachers, and unique insights of teacher learning in PLCs in the particular setting of Thanh Van in Vietnam. These are significant sources of practical implications for developing PLCs and collaborative learning for Vietnamese teachers in other similar contexts in order to promote teacher professional learning.

CHAPTER 2: The Context

2.1 Introduction

This chapter describes the context of this thesis. The study aimed to investigate the processes and outcomes relating to collaborative professional learning activities in Thanh Van with a particular focus on articulating the benefits to primary English teachers (PETs). In this Context chapter, I present a detailed account of English language education in Vietnam, specifically the popularity of English language learning in Vietnam, the introduction of English as a foreign language (EFL) to primary school level and the possible challenges associated with this new language policy. I then discuss the practice of English language teacher education and in-service professional learning. This information will assist the reader by providing an overview of the context for this study, and it will also make clear the significance of the present study.

2.2 English language education in Vietnam

2.2.1 Popularity of English language in Vietnam

The research that forms the basis for this thesis is set in a large Vietnamese city, where marked changes in foreign language education have occurred over different periods of reconstructing and developing the nation.

Foreign language education in Vietnam has been directly influenced by the country's international relations. Before 1975, Vietnam underwent a long history of colonisation by different foreign invaders, including China (111BC-938AD), France (1858-1945; 1945-1954) and the United States (1954-1975). Under their rule, the invaders aimed at introducing their language, namely Chinese, French or English, as a medium of instruction at schools and of communication in daily life, business and trading. As a result, each of these foreign languages was learned and widely used among Vietnamese people of different social positions over the different periods. Even daily communication among Vietnamese people in urban areas was often in the invaders' language.

After 1975, when the North and South of Vietnam were reunified as a nation, foreign language education changed according to the prevailing international relations. In the early years after the reunification (1975-1986), Vietnam was aligned with the Soviet Union in terms of politics, economy and education. During this period Russian was introduced as a major foreign language studied in secondary schools, tertiary and post-graduate studies across Vietnam (Denham 1992; Do 2006; Le 2007). A great number of Vietnamese students, teachers, lecturers and officials were sent to the Soviet Union to improve their Russian language as well as to develop their profession. For more than ten years after the reunification, Russian became the dominant foreign language and overshadowed the demands of English, French and other foreign languages.

Despite being a major foreign language in the South of Vietnam during the American War (1954-1975), English did not gain its 'ascendancy' (Denham 1992, p. 62) in Vietnamese society until 1986, when the Vietnamese government opened its doors to the world through a program of economic renewal known as *Doi Moi* (Renovation). At the Sixth National Congress of the Vietnamese Communist Party in 1986, Vietnam decided to adopt a market-oriented economy and to expand its relations with other countries regardless of their political systems. As a result, the number of foreign visitors and investors peaked, particularly those from English-speaking countries, who travelled back and forth to Vietnam for tourism or business. The English language 'underwent explosive growth during the early 1990s' (Do 2006, p. 8) and has become an important language of communication in different industries since then. The need for proficient English language speakers rose dramatically with the influx of foreign investments from different countries, including Hong Kong, Taiwan, Malaysia, Japan and the European Union. In 2006, Vietnam became a member of the World Trade Organisation (WTO), which resulted in the English language becoming the most significant language for trading and business purposes.

The increasing demand for proficient English language speakers has impacted upon the various foreign language education programs available in Vietnam since the late 1980s. From that point, Russian was no longer a major foreign language at schools and universities. Students had the right to choose to learn

any foreign language in their programs (Do 2006). It was estimated that in the early 1990s, 85% of Vietnamese learners chose English to learn over the other foreign languages (Ministry of Education and Training 1993, cited in Do 2006). Today, more than 90% of students in Vietnam choose to study English as a foreign language in their primary, secondary, tertiary or post-graduate studies (Nguyen 2012a). Private English language centres have mushroomed all over the country, particularly in large cities. Besides their English lessons at schools, students of different ages attend extra English language classes at these centres in the hope that they will be able to reach a higher level of English language proficiency.

English language skills are perceived to be essential for Vietnamese people. Obtaining a high proficiency of English language is considered 'the key which opens many doors' to success (Denham 1992, p. 64) or 'a must for success in both study and working' (Nunan 2003, p. 605) among Vietnamese people, particularly the youth. Vietnamese students with a high level of English proficiency expect a better future after graduating from universities (Ton & Pham 2010) as English language proficiency is one of the vital requirements for being recruited into either state or foreign companies (Do 2006). To be awarded with the title of associate professor or professor, university lecturers are required to present their projects in a foreign language, which many people choose to do in English. Opportunities for further studies overseas are more easily obtained for those with a high proficiency of English language. For these reasons, English language learning is not only common among secondary and university students, but also among students of pre-school and primary school age. An increasing number of parents would like their children to start learning English at a very early age. Khalifa, Nguyen and Walker's (2012) study showed that most parents have a positive attitude towards their children's English learning. They regarded English proficiency 'as a means to better life opportunities whether it is for social, study or work purposes' (Khalifa, Nguyen & Walker 2012, p. 13). However, the fact that more parents subscribe to the view that English is necessary for their children's future has created a number of controversial issues, which will be discussed in the following section.

2.2.2 English language learning at primary school level

This section describes the introduction of English as a foreign language (EFL) to primary school level in Vietnam and discusses the related issues, which have been widely reviewed in literature (see Chapter 3).

In 1993, a unified educational system was put in place after many years of attempts at different educational reforms (Tran & Nguyen 2000). The official national system includes five study levels as follows:

Primary education: Grades 1-5 (6-10 years old)

Lower secondary education: Grades 6-9 (11-14 years old)

Upper secondary education: Grades 10-12 (15-17 years old)

Higher education or Vocational Training, and

Post-graduate education.

As explained in the above section on the popularity of the English language in Vietnam, English has been widely studied in lower and upper secondary schools from year 6 to year 12 and in higher levels of education across Vietnam since the late 1980s. Nevertheless, the introduction of English language to primary school levels did not begin until the early 1990s. EFL teaching and learning at primary schools in Vietnam has undergone three major stages.

In the early 1990s, English language was first introduced as an optional subject at primary schools in Vietnam, without any official policy from the Ministry of Education and Training (MOET) about EFL learning and teaching. It was taught to Year 3 students, mainly in large cities such as Hanoi, Ho Chi Minh, Nha Trang and Hue (Ha 2006; Moon 2005; Nguyen & Nguyen 2007; Nunan 2003).

Concurrent with the ascendancy of English language in Vietnamese society, English language as an optional subject for Year 3 students became increasingly common in other cities. Along with the English programs in schools, parents also sent their young children to private language centres for extra English lessons. They hoped that their children would be able to study with more qualified teachers or teachers from native English-speaking countries and in contexts with advanced teaching and learning resources (Nunan 2003). It was

found that 77% of 2,685 parents in Ho Chi Minh city, who completed a survey on their children's English learning, sent their children to language centres for extra English lessons outside the intensive English programs at schools (Khalifa, Nguyen & Walker 2012). The growth of English language learning at primary schools in the early 1990s was driven by the parents' demand without any guidelines from the Vietnam's MOET.

The second stage of introducing English language at the primary school level was marked when Vietnam's MOET issued different policies aiming at improving the practice of English language learning and teaching as an optional subject. In 1996, Decision No. 6627/TH, dated September 18th of that year, was signed by Vietnam's MOET. This decision provided detailed guidance on foreign language education at primary schools (cited in Nguyen & Nguyen 2007). It decreed that English language be taught as an optional subject for primary students from their second semester of Year 3 across the country where learning and teaching conditions were suitable and where the children's parents supported the program of English language instruction. This policy envisaged that students would study English language for two 40-minute lessons per week. Since this time and possibly as a result of this policy, the teaching of English language in primary schools has been expanded across the country, from large cities to small towns or even to rural areas (Nguyen & Nguyen 2007).

In 2003, in order to make the instruction of English language at primary level more systematic, Decision No. 50/2003 QĐ-BGD&ĐT was signed on October 30th to introduce a curriculum of primary English language learning and teaching (2003). This was the first official curriculum for EFL instruction at primary school level, which emphasised the students' development of the four language skills, listening, speaking, reading and writing. The 2003 curriculum suggested that primary school students from Years 3 to 5 should study EFL for two 40-minute lessons per week. As a result, an increasing number of primary schools offered English language as an optional subject. It was reported that in 2007, approximately 32.2% of primary schools in Vietnam were teaching English language as an optional subject in accordance with the 2003 curriculum (Nguyen 2007).

In addition to the English language programs following the MOET's 2003 curriculum for primary schools, more specialist primary English language programs have been established in Vietnam, mainly in large cities. In the 1998-1999 academic year, the Department of Education and Training of Ho Chi Minh city (HCM DOET) initiated the Intensive English Programs for primary students in state schools, known as IEP. The primary school students in these programs had ten English lessons per week (Khalifa, Nguyen & Walker 2012). In the school year 2010-2011, the HCM DOET set up standardised proficiency tests for students in the IEP. These were based on the Cambridge English: Young Learners examinations and had three proficiency levels: Starters, Movers and Flyers (Cambridge English Language Assessment). These tests were introduced as 'mandatory to IEP' as they were considered a reliable assessment tool and served the purpose of organising progression within the IEP (Khalifa, Nguyen & Walker 2012, p. 9). This was briefly called the Cambridge English Program and an increasing number of state schools in Ho Chi Minh City joined, building to a total of 194 schools (out of 495) by 2011-2012. In the meantime, English Bilingual Education programs (EBE), which were aimed at teaching a number of subjects in English, were piloted in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City in 2010. These were implemented mainly in private and international primary and secondary schools (To 2010). In 2014, the HCM DOET developed a new program, called Integrated English Language. This new program aims to replace the Cambridge English Program and have primary school students and lower secondary school students study Maths, Science and English with English-speaking teachers for eight lessons per week (Hoang 2014). Since the academic year 2015-2016, the Integrated English Language Program has been carried out in Ho Chi Minh City. It was reported in a local newspaper that in its second year of implementation, this program was engaging thousands of students in more than seventy schools in Ho Chi Minh City (TDV 2016a) and received positive support from school leaders, parents and students (TDV 2016b). However, empirical evidence on the implementation of this new program is required.

Despite these indications of positive support from the stakeholders that these intensive or integrated English programs have received, research has revealed a

number of unintended effects (Khalifa, Nguyen & Walker 2012; To 2010). It was found, for example, that the Cambridge English program needed modifying to meet the local school conditions in terms of teacher qualifications, student numbers and assessment criteria. It was also reportedly regarded as a time filler for the children's free-time after the half day of schooling (Khalifa, Nguyen & Walker 2012). To (2010) has made similar claims that the implementation of the intensive English language programs in Ho Chi Minh City, such as the Cambridge English program or EBE, may have been hindered by negative attitudes from the leaders and learners, limited resources, insufficient learning time, teacher quality and professional competence and many other factors. These issues have raised the question as to whether the instruction of English language at primary level can be feasible given the particularities of Vietnam's educational context. This question will be further explored in the next section, where the problems of English language teaching and learning at primary schools in Vietnam will be discussed.

An earlier and more significant change in language policy relating to primary English language education in Vietnam was made in 2008, when the Vietnam government introduced Project 2020. This was an important foreign language education policy initiative at a national level for the period of 2008-2020 (Ministry of Education and Training 2008). This project set out 10-year foreign language learning programs from years 3-12 for all Vietnamese students. According to the guidelines for Project 2020, by the school year 2018-2019, English language or another foreign language will be taught across Vietnam at primary schools as a compulsory subject, using the MOET's pre-described curriculum and textbooks. Reflecting on the current status of English in Vietnam as set out above, English language will be the dominant foreign language learned within Project 2020.

Upon preparing for the implementation of the 2020 project, a number of initiatives have been carried out at the national and provincial levels. First, a pilot English language curriculum for primary level was launched in August 2010 (Ministry of Education and Training 2010a). This provided guidance for EFL instruction for primary school students from Year 3, having four 40-minute

lessons per week and using a Communicative Language Teaching Approach. The objective was to ensure that participating primary school students would reach Level A1 in the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching, Assessment (CEFR) at the end of Year 5 (Council of Europe 2001) (Appendix F). The second initiative is related to the development of resources. Primary English textbooks, namely Tiếng Anh 3, 4, and 5 (English 3, 4 and 5) (Do et al. 2010; Nguyen et al. 2012; Phan et al. 2011) were developed and piloted at some primary schools in major cities from the academic year 2010-2011. Following this trial, official versions were introduced at a national level (Do et al. 2014; Nguyen et al. 2016; Phan et al. 2015). The proliferation of English language at the primary school level has had huge implications for teacher demand and teacher professional development in this sector. MOET has made various attempts to improve primary English teachers' language proficiency and teaching methods. International organisations and experts in the field of teaching English to younger learners (TEYL) have been involved in a number of intensive training courses or workshops nationwide where primary English teachers (PETs) were trained in methods of TEFL and assessment. However, the extent of the benefits to teachers from these courses and workshops is questionable (see Section 2.3.2). It has been argued that the day-to-day practice of teaching English language at the primary level has not changed even after teachers have attended these compulsory formal professional learning programs.

2.2.3 Defining the problems of English language learning and teaching at primary school level

As presented in Section 2.2.2 above, the instruction of English language at primary level in Vietnam under different programs has been widely supported by the public and officially approved by the Vietnamese government. However, this trend is actually at the core of several contentious issues, which will be discussed in this section.

2.2.3.1 Fallacies in the policy

The trend towards lowering the commencement age for learning English as a foreign language has been reported to be problematic. Nunan (2003) reviewed the policies and practices of English language teaching and learning in seven Asia-Pacific countries including Mainland China, Hong Kong, Japan, Korea, Malaysia, Taiwan and Vietnam. He claimed that Vietnam had been implementing the new policy of primary school English language 'at significant cost to other aspects of the curriculum, without a clearly articulated rationale and without a detailed consideration of the costs and benefits of such polic[y] and practic[e] on the countr[y]' (Nunan 2003, p. 609). Arising from this, the question is whether the new language policy in Vietnam could be successfully implemented given the existing conditions of limited resources, teachers' low language proficiency and inappropriate training backgrounds, and unsystematic guidance that Vietnam had been experiencing. Eight years later, Baldauf et al. (2011) conducted another review on a wider range of Asia-Pacific countries, including Bangladesh, China, Japan, Malaysia, Nepal, Singapore, Taiwan, Timor-Leste and Vietnam. It might have been expected that the situation of teaching English language at primary level in Vietnam would improve in the years following the introduction of the National Foreign Language Project in 2008 and the detailed primary school English language curriculum in 2010. However, the 2011 review found little evidence supporting claims of success for the policy of lowering the age of learning a foreign language, in this case the English language. Vietnam still lacked 'massive commitments of funds, special early childhood teacher training and teachers with excellent language skills, books and materials' (Kaplan, Baldauf & Kamwangamalu 2011, p. 310). These authors indicated that faith in the efficacy of lowering the commencement age for learning English is actually a fallacy leading to a possible failure of the policy (Kaplan, Baldauf & Kamwangamalu 2011). It is clear that the policy of lowering the starting age for learning English language in primary schools seems to have many unresolved problems.

In fact, different researchers in language education and language policies have made similar arguments as to why such a resource-heavy language policy was

developed and is being implemented in Vietnam in particular, and in other Asia-Pacific polities in general. They have claimed that the policy is mainly based on the hypothesis that 'younger is better' (Nunan 2003, p. 605), or largely political (Kaplan & Baldauf 2007). The policy may come from the top-down notion that English language is required for societies to be competitive, and from the bottom-up pressure of the parents who see English language as the key to their children's future educational success (Baldauf et al. 2011). Further, Kaplan, Baldauf and Kamwangamalu (2011) have explained that the early introduction of English language can be viewed as urban myths that are inherent in two major fallacies:

- Being English-knowing is not a guarantee of an improvement in economic opportunity; and
- Early English learning is not a guarantee of near-native English proficiency.

(p. 316)

Although the early introduction of English language as some kind of general language policy panacea may be fallacious, the policy has been developed by the Vietnamese government and it is being implemented. As presented in section 2.2.2 above, English as a foreign language has been taught as an optional subject at many primary schools in Vietnam for more than two decades. This trend has recently become even more expansive not only in cities, but also in rural areas of Vietnam. The Project 2020 (Ministry of Education and Training 2008) may be seen as a response by the Vietnamese government to the booming industry of English language provision at primary school level. Nevertheless, it is clear that the policy remains controversial mainly because of the lack of capacity of resources and personnel in Vietnam (Baldauf et al. 2011; Moon 2005).

2.2.3.2 Under-preparedness of teacher resources

Much research conducted over the last decade has raised consistently the issue of the personnel factor in implementing this new language policy. A majority of current primary English teachers (PETs) were not trained to teach English language to younger learners, but to older learners (Baldauf et al. 2011; Hayes

2008b; Le & Do 2012; Moon 2005, 2009; Nguyen 2011; Nguyen & Nguyen 2007; Nunan 2003). This critical issue informs the focus of the research, which then forms the basis for this thesis. In a study on the English language learning and teaching in rural primary schools of one province in the North of Mekong Delta, Nguyen (2012b) found that the English teaching was still teacher-centred and focused on drills, repetition, explanation and translation. A majority of the investigated PETs defined the Communicative Approach or Total Physical Response as new teaching methods, which they had little knowledge of and therefore did not confidently use. Likewise, other research has found that most of the observed teachers used adult-oriented teaching methods, including a lot of focus on form, teacher-centred activities, choral drilling or repetition and limited use of group-work and pair-work (Le & Do 2012; Moon 2009). Additionally, the low English language proficiency of many of the teachers surveyed (Le & Do 2012; Moon 2009; Nunan 2003) may have negative impacts on their teaching methods. They are not likely to adopt the principles of the Communicative Language Teaching Approach (Le & Do 2012) – as suggested in the MOET's 2010 curriculum (Ministry of Education and Training 2010a), to use English as a language of instruction and to provide a good model of English to their students (Moon 2009). Hence, the viability of introducing English language to primary school students as a compulsory subject across Vietnam is open to challenge; Vietnamese PETs need to be retrained and train themselves to be able to teach EFL at primary schools.

A dearth of qualified primary school English language teachers is also apparent in other parts of the world. Other countries in Asia and in Europe (Enever 2014; Garton, Copland & Burns 2011; Hayes 2014) experience an urgent need for primary English teachers. They have to use 'unqualified locals', with only either a primary or secondary educational background, without language teaching methodology, to meet the explosive demand for teachers teaching English or a foreign language at primary level (Enever 2014; Hayes 2014). In a large-scale survey involving teachers from 144 countries, Garton, Copland and Burns (2011) found that many of the surveyed teachers 'did not start their teaching careers as teachers of English to young learners' (p. 11). Teachers' qualifications

influenced their EFL teaching at this level. In Enever's (2014) study, the less qualified teachers found it difficult to move away from 'the traditional teacher-fronted position, tended to overuse L1' and failed to 'maximise language production' (p. 240). Primary teachers of English in Korea were not able to implement prescribed communicative classroom methods due to their lack of understanding their purpose (Hayes 2014). The large-scale survey conducted by Garton, Copland and Burns (2011) reported a more positive picture of pedagogies in English language classrooms, in which both traditional and creative activities were used, such as repeating after the teacher, filling the gaps, games and songs. To these surveyed teachers, 'training in new language teaching methodologies' was the most important factor to improving their teaching (p. 14). Providing quality in-service professional learning programs was therefore primarily recommended to English teachers in this sector (Enever 2014; Garton, Copland & Burns 2011; Hayes 2014). These issues are strikingly similar to what has been found in the research focusing on Vietnam. I believe that Vietnam is experiencing a similar urgent need, as a result of the policies that were originally intended to facilitate the success of primary school English language instruction.

Given that the new policy has been and will continue to be implemented as planned throughout Vietnam in the academic year 2018-2019, it is critical to focus on ways of improving the situation of teachers and the day-to-day practice of English language teaching in all primary schools there. Legislative credentials for PETs were not set up until the Directive 1400 on Primary English Education was issued in August 2010. This specifies that the PETs should have a degree in teaching English language from either college or university and have English language proficiency equivalent to level B2 on the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFRL) (Council of Europe 2001; Ministry of Education and Training 2010a) (Appendix F). It also insists that they should have opportunities to attend professional development activities inside or outside school. The framework of teacher quality relating to the introduction of English language to primary school students is being examined by MOET as the reality shows that only a low percentage of the PETs currently teaching

English language at primary schools meet the specific requirements. Dr Nguyen Loc, Deputy-Director of the National Institute of Educational Strategy and Curriculum claimed that ‘in 2010, at least 1700 English language teachers were needed’ to teach English language as a compulsory subject at primary schools across Vietnam (Nguyen Loc 2010, cited in Nguyen 2011, p. 229). The obvious question is what percentage of the 1700 English language teachers could meet the legislative credentials proposed by the Vietnam’s MOET. In fact, the credentials of teacher quality required are not fully described in terms of knowledge of language teaching and methodology in the primary years. Teachers teaching EFL at primary schools need to have knowledge of teaching EFL to younger learners, which is undeniably different from the methods of teaching EFL to older learners. In Vietnam, training programs for primary English teachers have been recently developed but are offered at only some universities and colleges. Therefore, the number of graduates from these programs is too small to cater for the required number of 1700 primary English language teachers with appropriate training backgrounds. It is obvious then, that there needs to be a renewed focus on in-service professional learning for PETs.

2.2.3.3 Limited professional learning

In fact, the low level of language proficiency and inappropriate training backgrounds are not only acknowledged by the researchers and the educational policy makers, but also by the teachers themselves. Previous studies have revealed that PETs are conscious of their limited English language skills and inappropriate training background, and therefore wish to have more opportunities to learn to teach their primary students (Le & Do 2012; Nguyen 2011; Nguyen 2012b). The important questions are how they can be best retrained, and how it can be ensured that their day-to-day teaching practices would improve as a direct outcome of their training. Nguyen’s (2011) case study showed that the English language teachers from a private primary school in Hanoi created a more motivating environment by using various activities to engage their students in their English lessons while their colleagues teaching in a nearby public school did not. Nguyen (2011) claimed that this could be

attributed to the fact that the teachers in the private school had attended many topic-focused workshops at school, had regular peer observations, weekly professional meetings and consultation with an EFL advisor whenever they had difficulty or concerns in their teaching. These teachers valued their collaborative learning opportunities in school, where they could interact with the other teachers who shared the same teaching practice. In contrast, the teachers at the public school had limited professional learning opportunities. They were shown to have low motivation to attend the workshops or training courses offered by the Ministry or Department because, to them, the programs seemed to be irrelevant, not context-specific and not well organised (Nguyen 2011). The issues in professional learning of and for the PETs in Vietnam will be discussed further in the next section.

To sum up, the new policy of introducing English language as a compulsory subject at primary schools has generated a number of contentious issues. One of the most serious challenges arising from the implementation of this policy relates to the development of proficient teachers who are committed to professional learning.

2.3 English language teacher education and professional learning

The following section outlines the system of pre-service teacher education and in-service teacher development in Vietnam. The issues relating to the development of in-service teachers in general and primary English language teachers in particular will also be discussed in this section.

2.3.1 English language teacher education

In Vietnam, pre-service teachers of primary and secondary levels are trained at colleges and universities. Enrolling full-time in a pre-service teacher training program at a college, students are required to complete 116 credits in three years (College of Education and Training 2014), and those at a university have to complete 226 credits in four years (Ministry of Education and Training 2010b). These programs are designed to train teachers in a range of subjects,

including English as a foreign language. Those enrolled in the training programs for pre-service English language teachers are expected to complete three strands of knowledge, including foundation knowledge (Ho-Chi-Minhism, physical education, educational psychology, and so on), subject-matter knowledge (for English language teachers: English subjects including phonetics and phonology, grammar, morphology and semantics, pragmatics, British and American culture, the four language skills) and professional knowledge (English teaching methodology, assessment and teaching practicum). These training programs place much emphasis on knowledge about the subject, but little on teaching methods (only 26 out of 116 credits for the college program and 19 out of 226 credits for the university program). This accounts for Hanamo's (2008) claim that in teacher training programs in Vietnam 'little attention was paid to teaching methods' (p. 402), while both schools' leaders and EFL teachers themselves regarded teachers' professional skills as 'very essential' in the teaching profession (Truong, Phan & Phan 2011, p. 165).

English language teacher education in Vietnam seems to follow the assumption that teachers can learn how best to teach their students in their training programs (Johnson 2006). Working as a teacher trainer in a recognised university in Vietnam, I have developed a clear understanding of the current processes relating to the pre-service training of English language teachers. In university, the pre-service teachers learn a prescribed set of techniques of teaching English language components including vocabulary, grammar or pronunciation and techniques of teaching English language skills including listening, speaking, reading and writing. They learn as apprentices, following their masters (Hargreaves 2000), who are their teacher trainers, and practise these techniques or skills with their classmates in the micro-teaching sessions at universities. In their practicum at high schools, the pre-service teachers are required to observe the English lessons delivered by their supervisors, and practise teaching about six 45-minute lessons with secondary school students under the latter's supervision and mentorship. They are expected to follow the teaching models learned at their training programs and demonstrated by the supervisors in their lessons. This approach to pre-service teacher learning is

confirmed by Le's (2014) and Nguyen's (2014) studies. Le (2014) found that in-service teachers tended to work towards their supervisors' model of teaching during their practicum at high schools. Similarly, Nguyen (2014) claimed that pre-service teachers respect and are over-reliant on their trainers at university or supervisors in their practicum at high schools. The trainers or supervisors are considered as 'the source of all knowledge' (p. 237). The pre-service teachers dare not show their disagreement or dissent, have defensive attitudes, and are afraid of making mistakes. Teacher training is thus 'the accepted and largely unquestioned wisdom of what teaching really was' (Hargreaves 2000, p. 155). It appears that teachers are not encouraged to try out new teaching ideas in order to construct their experiential knowledge (Johnson 2006). However, the experts' knowledge which teachers learn in these training programs may be irrelevant to the specific context in which teachers teach after graduating (Kennet & Knight 1999). Also, they might not have learned to cope with unexpectedness, uncertainty or complexity that they are likely to have in teaching practice (Hargreaves 2000). Many Vietnamese PETs at primary schools employed adult-oriented teaching methods that they learned in their teacher training programs with little adaption in order to teach their primary school students. In order to teach better a group of students that they were not trained to, Vietnamese PETs need to have learned more than experts' knowledge of teaching EFL in their training programs. In teaching EFL at primary schools, it is requisite for them to engage in on-going relevant professional learning.

2.3.2 Continuous professional learning

The previous section highlighted the inadequate preparation of English language teachers for the contexts that they will be teaching in and the resultant importance of professional development for these teachers. In the following section, I provide an analytical account of the importance of professional learning of Vietnamese teachers in general and Vietnamese primary school English language teachers (PETs) in particular, the available professional learning opportunities, and the issues relating to in-service teacher learning.

2.3.2.1 Professional learning for Vietnamese teachers

Professional learning has long been considered as a requirement for all Vietnamese teachers (Ministry of Education and Training 2010c, 2011). Teachers are encouraged to attend different types of professional learning activities at different levels. Much effort and funding from the government and international agencies has been devoted to organising a large number of professional learning activities on different scales in order to upgrade the quality of teachers. However, the effectiveness of these activities is disputable. Remaining strongly impacted by the positivist paradigm or behaviourism (Hargreaves 2000), professional learning activities in Vietnam are mainly formally-delivered and theory-oriented using the transmissive and the cascade approaches (Hanamo 2008; Hayes 2008b). Common activities include workshops, seminars and short training courses (Le 2002), which are also known as in-service training (INSET) activities. It has been argued that these INSET activities are one-size-fits-all learning activities in which teachers have little chance to 'talk, think, try and hone' new ideas (Lieberman 1995, p. 69) by referring to the particularities of their teaching practice. As a result, there is often little classroom take-up from traditional one-off INSET courses.

A large body of literature has revealed the negative experience that Vietnamese English language teachers take from their INSET activities. Formal learning opportunities are not easily accessible to EFL teachers (Le 2002), particularly those in public primary schools (Nguyen 2011). A small number of PETs only are able to attend the workshops due to limited funding from their schools and provinces, and their onerous workloads in their schools. Additionally, the benefits that the teachers can obtain from these conventional formal training programs seem to be limited. In their study, Lewis and McCook (2002) claimed that the possibility of trying out updated knowledge learned in a workshop on the Communicative Language Teaching Approach was made difficult by the practical obstacles presented, such as large class sizes or form focused examinations. In a similar vein, Pham's (2007b) study showed that English teachers who had attended either of two INSET activities, namely Teacher In-service Education program (TIE) funded by AusAID from 1998-2002 and

Vietnam's English Teacher and Trainer Network (VTTN) managed by the British Council, failed to apply new communicative techniques, although they valued the workshops as an opportunity to update their knowledge of the Communicative Language Teaching Approach.

Recently, in addition to the conventional INSET activities, Vietnamese teachers have engaged in innovative strategies of professional learning, including: school clusters (Hanamo 2008), Critical Friends Groups (Vo & Nguyen 2010), staff meetings, peer observations or professional seminars (Le & Nguyen 2012), international collaborative partnerships (Trinh & Laws 2010), or learning communities (Cham 2013; Nguyen 2016; Saito, Khong & Tsukui 2012; Saito & Tsukui 2008). These previous studies have reported inconsistent outcomes on the benefits and challenges of these innovative learning strategies (see Chapter 3 for further discussion). It has been argued that collaborative learning is not well-resourced and not necessarily culturally familiar to Vietnamese teachers (Pham 2001). Given the potential of this approach for professional learning, there would seem to be an obvious need for more empirical evidence on collaborative learning in the Vietnamese context, where it is demonstrably needed, particularly for PETs. The next section will discuss how the PETs in Vietnam have been learning to teach up to this point in time.

2.3.2.2 Professional learning for Vietnamese primary school English language teachers

Vietnam's new policy of introducing English language to primary level as a compulsory subject (Ministry of Education and Training 2008) has urged current PETs to learn to teach more effectively. As explained in Section 2.2.3, a majority of Vietnamese PETs have a low level of English proficiency and were trained to teach EFL at secondary schools, not at primary schools. Therefore, learning to teach better is not only a requirement for Vietnamese PETs explicitly requested by the schools, department and ministry, but is also the PETs' expectation underlying the burgeoning of EFL learning in the primary sector. Many of the PETs studied (Le & Do 2012; Nguyen 2011) expressed their desire to learn to teach, wished to attend more workshops on TEYL methods (Nguyen

2011), or expected to have more collaborative learning opportunities with their colleagues by being observed, given feedback or consulted (Le & Do 2012). To put it simply, the PETs in Vietnam appear to be highly motivated to gain as much as they can through effective professional development.

Vietnam's MOET has made various attempts to promote the quality of PETs across the nation. Within the framework of the National Foreign Language Project 2020, a number of training courses and workshops have been conducted at national and provincial level for in-service PETs. Teachers were sent to language centres or universities to improve their English language proficiency to obtain B2 level on the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR), as specifically defined in the legislative credentials for the Vietnamese PETs (Ministry of Education and Training 2010a). In preparation for the new primary English language curriculum, Vietnam's MOET conducted yearly training courses on using the new MOET English language textbooks (Tiếng Anh 3, 4, 5 (English 3, 4, 5 series) (Do et al. 2010; Nguyen et al. 2012; Phan et al. 2011). These courses were conducted in the cascade approach, which was used to transmit knowledge or information from the MOET and experts to the next generation of teachers (Dichaba & Mokhele 2012). The courses involved only the EFL consultant and a small number of senior PETs from the cities and provinces where the new materials were piloted. Furthermore, the MOET has secured the support from different international experts and organisations to upgrade Vietnamese PETs' teaching knowledge and skills. For example, the British Council conducted a number of intensive training workshops on TEYL, which engaged only a small proportion of PETs in bigger cities such as Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City. Likewise, as a major publisher in the field of English language learning and teaching, Oxford University Press also held several workshops on TEYL. However, these workshops were claimed to be 'short and focused on the use of the new materials' (Nguyen 2011, p. 238). They were more interested in selling their textbooks than training teachers.

Additionally, intensive workshops on the methodology of TEYL were conducted nation-wide in the early 2010s, covering the principles of TEYL, language assessment, techniques of developing primary students' oral and literacy skills

and integrating technology in language teaching (Pham 2013). This is regarded as the first ever series of workshops on TEYL within the framework of the National Foreign Language Project 2020 that was delivered on a large scale involving a substantial number of PETs and designed to be more practical. The workshops were implemented within a three-week period of time, for approximately 180 hours, and involved most PETs from each province. The participant teachers were sent to primary schools to apply their newly learned knowledge and skills to teach real students. Nevertheless, the effectiveness of this series of workshops has been questioned. Pham (2013) reported possible obstacles preventing the PETs in a central city of Vietnam from applying 'the up-to-date teaching methods [which] are made available' to them at the workshops (p. 68). The factors include administrative issues (workload, occupational instability, low pay), professional issues (professional inferiority, illusion of perfectionism, ignorance of curriculum, fear of change or failure) and school culture issues (limited professional development environment, limited resources, large class sizes). These obstacles are not new, and have long been discussed in a wide body of literature on the teaching and learning English language at primary level in Vietnam and other Asian countries (e.g., Hayes 2008b; Kaplan, Baldauf & Kamwangamalu 2011; Le & Do 2012; Moon 2005, 2009; Nguyen 2011; Nguyen & Nguyen 2007; Nunan 2003).

In reflecting on the first ever large-scale, well-designed and costly workshop run within the framework of the National Project 2020, one would hope that these obstacles would have been carefully considered in designing and delivering the programs. Much time should have been allocated for the participant teachers to discuss their issues in the three-week intensive workshop, rather than 'to receive the wisdom and knowledge from the lips of experts' (Waters 1993, cited in Pham 2007b, p. 312). This would allow for teachers' professional growth and improvement in their teaching practice. The large-scale intensive workshop experienced the same challenges that the conventional INSET activities had had. It seemed that too much focus was on 'what teachers have to know ... rather than what they actually know' (Freeman & Johnson 1998, p. 398), and on a teacher-centred approach or modelling in professional learning. This activity

did not accommodate teachers' communicative or collaborative learning, which Vygostkian's social learning theory emphasises and which has been reported to be effective in various contexts (e.g., Boyle, Lamprianou & Bolye 2005; Chien 2013; Samimy et al. 2011; Yildirim 2008). The lack of communication and collaboration among PETs in that large-scale workshop series leads to a critical focus on the effectiveness and potential of collaborative learning for primary English teachers, in my specific context.

Generally, continuous professional learning for Vietnamese teachers in general and PETs in particular has been considered as a requisite in reforming education in Vietnam. However, in-service teacher professional learning activities in Vietnam have focused on mainly a formal teacher-centred training approach and one-size-fits-all activities, from which the participant teachers could not take full benefits towards improving their teaching. On the other hand, innovative professional learning opportunities were also carried out in Vietnam, although of a limited scope. Of particular interest to me as a researcher is the introduction of an innovative professional learning activity called *Sinh hoạt cụm chuyên môn* (*Participating in Professional Communities*) for the primary school English language teachers in Thanh Van. This activity has been conducted since 2008 but has not been the subject of any research.

2.3.2.3 Professional learning communities

This section presents an overview of the activity called *Sinh hoạt cụm chuyên môn* (*Participating in Professional Communities*), which has operated as a professional learning activity for primary English teachers (PETs) across Thanh Van. The term Professional Learning Communities (PLCs), which has been widely used in the literature of professional learning (see Chapter 3) is used to refer to this activity.

The professional learning communities (PLCs) were set up by the Department of Education and Training (DOET) of Thanh Van, specifically by the EFL consultant. The EFL consultant initiated the establishment of PLCs in 2008 when he started his current position of consulting and supervising the activities of teaching and learning English as a foreign language at primary school level in that city and realised the challenges that PETs had in teaching and learning to teach. The

PLCs were then developed as an official and compulsory professional development activity for the PETs. The PLCs originally started as one community for all the PETs across the city and held one meeting every month. In 2010, the former community was split into the six communities they are today as more primary schools in the city began offering English language from Year 3 or from Year 1 and the number of PETs in each school and across the whole city increased. To facilitate shared learning, the communities are regrouped every one or two years. PETs of varied professional backgrounds and teaching and learning experience from primary schools of various academic, economic and sociocultural conditions come together. Each PLC includes the PETs from seven or eight schools, which make up the total members in each community ranging from twenty to twenty five. In each PLC, two PETs, who are more experienced in TEYL, are appointed by the DOET to be the leaders of that PLC to facilitate its activities. In recent years, the DOET has suggested each PLC has at least one meeting every semester (four months) and schedules the activities in accordance with its members' needs. It seems that the PLCs operated differently from how the conventional INSET activities in Vietnam have been carried out (see the previous section). The PLCs bring teachers of different schools together to interact professionally and they allow for teachers' active involvement in deciding what and how to learn. In the PLCs' activities, PETs are able to observe each other's teaching, to discuss the lessons' strength and shortcomings, and to exchange experience and issues in their day-to-day teaching practice. Their professional learning is thus inquiry-embedded, which is likely to result in professional growth and transformation in teaching practice. However, there has been no study that investigates the implementation of the PLCs and their benefits to the PETs' growth and teaching practice since they were developed in that city in 2008. Taking a sociocultural perspective on teacher learning, this research is the first ever work to explore how the PLCs have operated as learning sites to cater for the particularities of the specific context that the PETs in Thanh Van need to learn to teach from their background of secondary school EFL teachers.

2.4 Summary of the chapter

This chapter has presented an overview of the context where my study was conducted and highlighted the significance of this study. Since the early 1990s, English as a foreign language has gained its dominance at different levels of education in Vietnam. The introduction of EFL to primary schools was initially in response to what parents wanted for their children and later, was officially approved and guided by the Vietnamese government. The National Foreign Language Project 2020 was launched in 2008, aiming to introduce EFL as a compulsory subject for Year 3 students across the country by the 2018-2019 academic year. However, it has been argued that the policy of lowering the formal learning age of EFL has resulted in a range of contentious issues. The most serious of these has been the under-preparedness of teachers and lack of teaching resources. The PETs' English language proficiency is limited; and their teaching methods are more adult-oriented as most of them were trained to teach adult learners, not younger ones. Another significant issue was that professional learning opportunities were not readily available to the PETs and where they were available were not efficient in improving their teaching practice. Innovative learning strategies such as school clusters, learning communities or critical friend groups, which have proved to be efficient in enhancing teachers' knowledge and teaching in other contexts, have recently been implemented in Vietnam, but not much explored. This study is particularly interested in investigating one professional learning activity of this kind. That is, how the PLCs have operated as learning sites for the PETs in the specific context of Thanh Van. The next chapter will present the conceptual framework, which provides the theoretical and analytical basis of this study.

CHAPTER 3: Literature Review

3.1 Introduction

This chapter develops the conceptual framework for this study. As stated in the Introduction and Background Chapters, my study focuses on teacher learning, particularly teacher learning within Professional Learning Communities (PLCs). It is important to explore how PLCs came into being and their affordances for teacher learning. The research was located in Central Vietnam and for this and other reasons to be stated, the literature informing this research needs to be reviewed. Reviewing the literature on teacher professional learning, I learned that the majority of the literature on this topic has been influenced and informed by specific sociocultural contexts. The recontextualisation of PLCs for Vietnam and their affordances for teacher learning there are investigated in this study.

This chapter has two purposes: one is to review the literature pertinent to the present research and identify the academic and professional work to which this study contributes, and the second is to explore the three assumptions on which the study is based and to develop the thesis argument. The assumptions are: professional learning is contextualised; teacher knowledge is socially constructed and unique to each teacher in a particular context of teaching; and mediation promotes teacher's professional growth. I first provide a rationale for using the term 'professional learning' instead of 'professional development' in this study.

3.2 Terminology: Professional learning or professional development

There is a plethora of terms describing teacher learning. 'Professional development' and 'professional learning' are used interchangeably in much of the literature. In this section I explain the differences between the two terms as

they are used in the literature and why I adopt the term 'professional learning' in my study.

Examining the existing activities of professional learning and development, Fraser et al. (2007) have attempted to provide a clearer understanding of these two concepts: professional learning refers to an intuitive or deliberate process which leads to 'specific changes in the knowledge, skills, attitudes, beliefs or actions of teachers', while professional development represents a long-term process leading to 'qualitative shifts in aspects of teachers' professionalism' (Fraser et al. 2007, p. 157). In this distinction, the outcomes of 'professional development' are on a broader scope, for example, changing schools or departments, while those of 'professional learning' are in line with the growth in teachers' skills and knowledge and the improvement of their teaching practices.

Kelly (2006) has used the term 'continuous professional development' to refer to planned learning opportunities and the term 'teacher learning' to the 'process in which teachers move towards expertise' (pp. 505-6). Aubusson, Ewing and Hoban (2009) compared three types of teacher learning: 'professional development, continuous professional development and professional learning' (p. 12). Here professional development refers to short and one-off training events while continuous professional development describes a sequence of training events such as workshops, courses, programmes and conferences. According to Aubusson, Ewing and Hoban (2009), in professional development and continuous professional development activities teachers have

little responsibility to determine content and no structured teacher learning processes back at school ... [Professional learning is a] long-term approach with teachers having a major influence in determining the content. This form is also accompanied by a framework with multiple teacher learning processes and conditions to sustain teacher learning back at school. (p. 12)

To put it simply, the vehicles for professional development are usually formal learning opportunities conducted by outsiders, while the opportunities of

professional learning are more likely in informal professional exchanges among teachers and between teachers and other people in their community. In these informal learning opportunities, teachers make their own decisions about how and what they would like to learn to teach.

My research fits more comfortably with the term 'professional learning'. It aims to examine how Vietnamese teachers learn to become primary English teachers (PETs) in professional learning communities (PLCs). Despite being initiated by the Department of Education and Training (DOET) as a compulsory professional learning activity for the PETs in Thanh Van, the PLCs are held as informal learning events where the teachers contribute to the content and format. As a researcher, I am interested in investigating the opportunities teachers have to learn and develop teaching skills and knowledge so that they can provide a better teaching service to their student clientele. For these reasons, the term 'professional learning' is used in this study.

3.3 Teacher learning: An overview

Teacher learning has moved through many phases over the past five decades. The phases include apprenticeships, cognition oriented, teachers as passive technicians, a focus on teachers as individuals (personal learning or self-awareness) and as contextualised in their social and cultural settings (Kelly 2006). This study, while drawing on a sociocultural perspective, identifies the multi-dimensional ways that teacher learning occurs in PLCs. An understanding of how teacher learning has moved through different phases provides a framework for investigating how the PETs learn in their communities.

Traditionally, teachers were viewed as apprentices learning the craft of teaching. This approach to teaching is also known under the name of 'pre-professional age'. In this age, teacher learning was seen 'as a matter of apprenticing oneself as a novice to someone who was skilled and more experienced' (Hargreaves 2000, p. 155). Teachers were supposed to unquestionably master a discrete set of behaviours or skills through modelling, observing, micro-teaching or practicums under the supervision of more

experienced or veteran teachers (Freeman & Johnson 1998; Richards & Farrell 2005; Roberts 1998). Teachers would make a few adjustments through trial and error. Their success in teaching was viewed as the mastery of these skills and successful application of them in their teaching. With this approach to teaching, 'teachers need little training or on-going professional learning' (Hargreaves 2000, p. 157).

In contrast, the cognitive perspective sees teachers as passive technicians. The cognitive position is simplistic in its belief about what and how teachers learn to teach. Cognitivists advocate a view that teachers acquire an inventory of knowledge, skills and understandings about teaching designed by experts for one setting and are able to apply that body of knowledge in any teaching context (Kelly 2006). This body of knowledge is usually research-driven and designed 'in the forms of general theories and methods' (Freeman & Johnson 1998, p. 399). The teachers' expertise is evaluated according to the extent that they can implement the theories into their practice.

From the cognitive perspective, 'teacher expertise resides entirely in the teachers' minds' (Kelly 2006, p. 506). Teachers learn mainly in coursework, workshops or short training programs, but not in their classrooms. These activities are known as 'direct teaching' (Lieberman 1995, p. 70), 'one-off or one-size-fits-all' events (Diaz-Maggioli 2003, p. 3), or 'top-down professional development models' (Johnson 2006, p. 243). It has been argued that because these prearranged learning opportunities are externally delivered by experts in the transmission approach (Fraser et al. 2007), they have little input of new knowledge into classroom practices (Johnson 2006), or only provide 'a melange of abstract ideas with little attention paid to ongoing support for continuous learning and changed practices' (Lieberman 1995, p. 69). Teachers are expected to implement a decontextualised body of knowledge that does not account for the complexities of the interrelationship between teachers, learners and the teaching context (Freeman & Johnson 1998; Kelly 2006). A substantial body of research (reviewed in Liu 1998) shows that such abstract and decontextualised knowledge is seldom used by teachers in their practice.

In later developments in thinking about teacher learning, teachers were no longer taken as passive technicians who receive expert knowledge, but as reflective practitioners (Schön 1983), who were 'thoughtful people who made rational decisions about what to do in their classrooms' (Freeman & Johnson 1998, p. 400). This approach became known as teacher cognition (Borg 2003, 2015). Borg (2015) claims 'teachers are active, thinking decision-makers who play a central role in shaping classroom events' (p. 1). They actively think, judge and make decisions on their teaching behaviours based on the contextual information and the theories of teaching and learning they have acquired. As decision makers, teachers are expected to make their knowledge and decisions explicit, and thereby gain benefits for their development. In this historical period, known as the 'autonomous professional' age, teachers were regarded as autonomous learners who self-direct their learning, and the way classroom teachers taught was 'ultimately left to their individual professional judgment' (Hargreaves 2000, p. 158). They themselves would know what they needed to learn and how the knowledge could be applied in their teaching.

Teacher learning experienced marked epistemological shifts in the 1980s. The 1980s has been called 'a full decade of change and reconceptualisation of teachers and their mental lives' (Freeman 2002, p. 5) because a number of innovative frameworks about teacher knowledge were proposed. Shulman's (1987) framework is well known for its phrase 'pedagogical content knowledge' (p. 8), which describes a teachers' capacity to transform content into accessible and learnable forms with their unique understandings of teaching practice. Highlighting teachers' personal experiences as learners and teachers, Connelly and Clandinin (1985) proposed a component of personal practical knowledge: teacher knowledge, which is 'experiential, embodied and reconstructed out of the narratives of a teacher's life' (Clandinin & Connelly 1987, p. 490). Teachers' prior experiences as students, their personal values and beliefs about teaching and learning and personal interpretations of teaching and context are 'extremely influential in shaping how and why [they] do what they do in their classrooms' (Johnson 2006, p. 236).

Likewise, in Cochran-Smith and Lytle's (1999) framework of teacher knowledge, two components – knowledge in practice and knowledge of practice – were proposed. This framework emphasises the significance of examining teaching practice in constructing teachers' knowledge. In addition to acquiring expert knowledge in their teacher training programs, teachers critically analyse their teaching practice to internalise and construct knowledge of their practice in order to make their teaching accessible to their students.

These innovative frameworks put an emphasis on the teachers as active agents in the process of learning and constructing their knowledge. Teachers are no longer considered to be passive receivers of the theoretical knowledge and pedagogical skills prescribed by the experts in their field, particularly if these experts have little understanding of the practice of teaching (Liu 1998). Teachers' own unique understanding of the teaching context with its particular social, cultural and political features and experiences enable teachers to better shape their knowledge of how to teach. However, it has been argued that within these frameworks, teachers teach and learn to teach 'in a box' (Hargreaves 2000, p. 160). Their learning is separated from the community they belong to. Instead, it is believed that teachers should continuously learn through their experiences and in collaboration with others, which would reflect the sociocultural perspective on human learning. The next section focuses on teacher learning from a sociocultural perspective.

3.4 Teacher learning from a sociocultural perspective

At its core, the premise of sociocultural theory supports the notion that the human mind is socially mediated by constructed symbolic artifacts – most significantly, language (Lantolf 2000). Humans develop as 'participants in cultural communities ... and their development can be understood in light of cultural practices and circumstances of their communities – which also change' (Rogoff 2003, pp. 3-4). From this epistemological stance, human learning is defined as a dynamic activity situated in specific contexts (Rogoff 2003;

Vygotsky 1978). In other words, a human's cognitive development depends on the specific socially mediated activities that they engage in.

The sociocultural perspective on human learning and cognitive development has exerted a marked impact on how teacher professional learning has been conceptualised and redefined by prominent scholars in the field (e.g., Diaz-Maggioli 2003; Johnson 2006, 2009; Johnson & Golombek 2011; Kelly 2006; Richards 2008). Teacher learning has been defined as 'an evolving process of self-disclosure, reflection, and growth that yields the best results when sustained over time in communities of practice and when focused on job-embedded responsibilities' (Diaz-Maggioli 2003, p. 3). In this process, teachers actively 'move towards expertise' (Kelly 2006, p. 514). In addition, accounting for collaboration and context, this particular aspect of teacher learning is redefined as 'a form of socialisation into the professional thinking and practices of a community' (Richards 2008, p. 160) or as a dynamic social activity that is 'normative and lifelong ... built through experiences in multiple social contexts' (Johnson 2009, p. 10).

These definitions of teacher learning share an epistemological stance on how teachers learn to teach. Teacher learning is not viewed as 'one-off or one-size-fits-all event' (Diaz-Maggioli 2003, p. 3) or as an individual endeavour residing entirely in a teacher's mind, but 'distributed across teachers, students' and other relevant people (Kelly 2006, p. 507). It is 'socially negotiated and contingent on [teacher] knowledge of self, students, subject matter, curricula and setting' (Johnson 2006, p. 239). Teachers' learning does not stop when they graduate from a teacher education program, but is 'a long-term, complex, developmental process that operates through participation in the social practices and contexts associated with learning and teaching' (Freeman & Johnson 1998, p. 402). The context is 'not necessarily limited to specific geopolitical boundaries, but can be socio-political, socio-historical, and socio-economic contexts' (Johnson 2006, p. 245). They learn upon interacting with their students, parents, colleagues and other stakeholders in their daily practice. These interactions are significantly emphasised in the sociocultural perspective on teacher learning (Johnson 2009;

Kelly 2006; Richards 2008). Therefore, teacher learning is ongoing, socially interactive and embedded in specific contexts. This perspective on teacher learning was adopted as a theoretical framework in this study in order to examine the ways that Vietnamese PETs learned in their PLCs.

3.4.1 Key constructs in the sociocultural perspective

The key constructs of teacher learning from a sociocultural perspective have been defined by Johnson and Golombek (2003) as ‘the fundamental elements that enable researchers to trace the internal cognitive processes of teacher learning’ (p. 730). These constructs are internalisation, mediation, and the zone of proximal development. These constructs function as an analytical framework for my analysis of the learning process that the PETs experienced in their PLC, and I will now briefly describe each of them.

3.4.1.1 Internalisation

The first construct of the sociocultural perspective on teacher learning is internalisation. Mental or cognitive development ‘is characterised as the progressive movement from external, socially mediated activity to internal mediation controlled by individual learners’ (Johnson 2009, p. 17).

Internalisation is ‘not a straightforward appropriation of concepts, knowledge or skills from the outside in ... but a dialogic process of transformation of self and activity’ (p. 18). According to Lantolf (2000), ‘any attempts to ground explanations of mental development in the isolated individuals are inadequate’ (p. 14).

In the context of teacher learning, a teacher’s cognitive development or knowledge development needs to be traced through their process of moving from socially mediated activity to self-controlled mediation. Teachers’ growth is ‘their appropriating alternative ways of thinking about the social practices associated with [their teaching]’ (Johnson & Golombek 2003, p. 732). By taking into account the available resources and other particularities in their teaching practice (Johnson 2009; Johnson & Golombek 2003; Lantolf 2000), teachers play

a significant role in deciding what is internalised and how their appropriate ways of teaching are shaped. The next section will discuss how mediational tools facilitate teacher learning in order to make internalisation or cognitive development happen.

3.4.1.2 Mediation

The second construct of the sociocultural perspective on teacher learning is mediation. Johnson and Golombek (2011) claim that mediation is paramount for internalisation or transformation because cognitive development ‘emerges over time and depends on the agency of the learner and the affordances or constraints of the learning environment’ (p. 4). According to Vygotsky (1978), humans mediate their activities in the environment by using three different tools. The tools ‘represent cultural artifacts and activities, concepts and our social relations with others’ (Johnson & Golombek 2011, p. 4).

The first mediational tool is cultural artifacts and activities, which are defined as ‘simultaneously material and conceptual aspects of human goal-directed activity that are not only incorporated into the activity, but are constitutive of it’ (Lantolf & Thorne 2006, p. 62). These are also known as object-regulated mediational means to mediate teacher learning (Johnson & Golombek 2003). In the mediated learning process, cultural artifacts and activities function as material tools to physically engage teachers in learning activities. They also function as psychological tools to stimulate thinking while teachers engage in a mediated learning activity with a specific aim. How teacher learning is mediated through cultural artifacts and activities can be illustrated in Poehner’s (2011) study on Critical Friends Groups as an inquiry-based professional development approach for elementary and middle school teachers to learn to teach writing. A set of procedures, questions and time frames were the cultural artifacts that mediated the teachers’ learning in their Critical Friends Groups. These functioned as material tools to make up learning activities among the teachers and also as psychological tools to enable the teachers to think about and reflect on their practice of teaching writing.

The second mediational tool in the internalisation process is concepts. The concepts include everyday and scientific ones. In the context of second language teacher education, scientific concepts are the theories of second language acquisition, principles of language teaching and learning, language assessment and testing, and so on. These scientific concepts are usually taught explicitly and systematically through formal education, specifically teacher training and professional development programs. According to Johnson and Golombek (2011), in seeing teacher learning from a sociocultural perspective, scientific concepts are used as psychological tools (thinking in concepts) 'to problem solve across instructional contexts and activities... in order to 'restructure and transform their everyday concepts' (p. 4). As a result, teachers are able to develop their everyday concepts or generate their local knowledge of practice (Cochran-Smith & Lytle 1999; Kelly 2006) in the light of scientific concepts or knowledge for practice.

The third tool of the internalisation process is social relations or human mediation, which is also known as other-regulated mediational means (Johnson 2009; Johnson & Golombek 2011). According to Johnson and Golombek (2011), this concept is fundamental to understanding how networks or social interactions mediate the internalisation process; social relations can be in different forms of interactions among participants and vary depending on the setting and the target of their learning. In the context of teacher learning, social interactions may include discussions, exchanges or professional chat among colleagues or teachers within and outside schools. Previous studies have revealed positive impacts of social interactions on teachers' professional growth (Reis 2011; Smolcic 2011). For example, in order to develop their intercultural competence, ESL teachers in Ecuador engaged in a short-term teaching experience and a cultural and linguistic immersion program (Smolcic 2011). These teachers developed their intercultural competence in the social relations of guided discussion, reflection and guidance from peers and mentors. Similarly, non-native English speaking teachers in Japan repositioned themselves as 'legitimate English language professionals' when participating in the social

relations of dialogic blogs to discuss with their colleagues the native speaker–non-native speaker dichotomy and the ‘native speaker myth’ (Reis 2011).

Given these mediational means in the teacher learning process, teachers are provided with a social space to externalise their understandings of teaching and then recontextualise or internalise those understandings in reference to their particular teaching practice. In other words, these mediational tools facilitate teachers’ internalisation or transformation processes, in which teachers ‘move from external social activity to internal control over their cognitive and emotional states’ (Johnson & Golombek 2003, p. 734).

3.4.1.3 Zone of proximal development

A widely known concept of Vygotsky’s (1978) sociocultural perspective is the zone of proximal development (ZPD). ZPD is defined as the difference between what a person can accomplish on their own and what the same person can achieve with support from others (Johnson & Golombek 2003) and/or cultural artifacts (Vygotsky 1978). According to Lantolf (2000), ZPD is ‘not a physical place situated in time and space; rather it is a metaphor for observing and understanding how mediational means are appropriated and internalised’ (p. 17). Within an activity in the ZPD, individuals are able to not only ‘rise above their past’ by copying what the experts do or share, but also transform or internalise what the experts offer them, if appropriate (Johnson & Golombek 2003; Lantolf 2000). The literature shows that the scope of ZPD in teacher learning expands beyond the interactions between experts and novices to include peer interactions and that teachers grow within the ZPD with the support of their peer teachers (Fisher & Frey 2007; Murray, Ma & Mazur 2009).

In this study, the key constructs of the sociocultural perspective – internalisation, mediation and ZPD – are used as tools to analyse the complex nature of the PETs’ learning in their PLCs.

3.4.2 Language teacher knowledge

From a sociocultural perspective, one's epistemological stance on teacher learning shapes how teacher knowledge is viewed. Teachers are not empty vessels waiting to be filled with expert knowledge and skills of teaching (Freeman & Johnson 1998), but are 'users and creators of legitimate forms of knowledge' who decide how best to teach their particular group of students in a specific social and cultural context (Johnson 2006, p. 239). Teacher knowledge does not emerge from a process of imposing new theories or methods as the cognitive approach would suggest, but is constructed by teachers reshaping their existing knowledge and beliefs (Johnson & Golombek 2003). In other words, teacher knowledge is socially negotiated, constructed, reconstructed and actively used to teach particular groups of students.

Different frameworks on language teacher knowledge have been proposed in the literature (Freeman & Johnson 1998; Kumaravadivelu 2012; Richards 2001). Freeman and Johnson (1998), whose work is considered a significant contribution to the field, proposed a knowledge-based framework for language teacher education that consists of three interdependent domains: the teacher-learner, the social and cultural context and the pedagogical process. This framework was guided by their rhetorical question, 'Who teaches what to whom, where?' (Freeman & Johnson 1998, p. 405), which emphasises the roles the teacher, the teaching and its specific context in developing the teacher's knowledge. Specifically, teachers are represented as learners of language teaching. Social and cultural contexts are critical for teachers' learning and knowledge construction, and the pedagogical process incorporates issues related to language teaching and language learning. Accordingly, the accumulation of knowledge throughout teachers' professional careers is grounded in the interaction between teachers' teaching, learning, and social and cultural contexts. In other words, in this framework, there seems no best method; rather, the teacher's sense of plausibility (Prabhu 1990) is emphasised.

Highlighting the ultimate role of teachers in determining the success of a language program, Richards (2001) proposed a comprehensive framework of teacher knowledge in English language teacher development. He suggested six core components of language teacher knowledge, which include practical knowledge (a repertoire of classroom techniques and strategies), content knowledge (an understanding of the subject of TESOL, such as pedagogical grammar, phonology and second language acquisition), contextual knowledge (familiarity of school or institutional context and knowledge of learners), pedagogical knowledge (ability to restructure or adapt content knowledge for teaching purposes), personal knowledge (the teacher's personal beliefs and principles or his or her individual approach to teaching) and reflective knowledge (the teacher's capacity to reflect on and assess his or her own practice) (Richards 2001, pp. 209-10). In this framework, Richard (2001) put an emphasis on the two components of personal and reflective knowledge to highlight the roles of teachers' personal beliefs, attitudes and assumptions about language teaching. Holding to the beliefs and attitudes about language teaching, English language teachers are able to critically observe their classrooms (Kumaravadivelu 1999, 2012) and theorise their own practice with a set of maxims (Richards 1996) for best practical teaching behaviours to their particular student.

Kumaravadivelu (2012) has also proposed an innovative modular model for global teacher education. This framework was developed from the three parameters of post-method pedagogy of second language learning and teaching – particularity, practicality and possibility (Kumaravadivelu 2001, 2006). According to Kumaravadivelu (2012), these three parameters function as the operating principles 'in designing a coherent, comprehensive teacher education program' (pp. 15-6). The model includes five interconnected modules: knowing, analysing, recognising, doing and seeing (see Kumaravadivelu (2012) for a full description of each module or skill).

With its cyclical, interactive and integrative nature, the Kumaravadivelu's (2012) modular model aims at educating language teachers so that they become

'self-determining and self-transforming individuals' (p. 17) and therefore helping teacher educators to 'move away from transmission and towards transformation' (p. 18). Language teachers are expected to develop their professional, procedural and personal knowledge; analyse learner needs, motivation and autonomy; recognise their own identities, beliefs and values; teach, theorise and dialogise; and see their own teaching from the perspectives of a learner, a teacher and an observer.

Being developed as a framework for language teacher education, Kumaravadivelu's (2012) modular model seems to offer me as a researcher an innovative analytical lens to examine the ways in which professional learning opportunities allow for in-service teacher professional learning. With this model, teacher professional learning involves a development of a range of interconnected skills, knowledge and senses that teachers are able to draw on in their particular teaching context from their practice and through their interactions with other relevant people.

As regards teacher knowledge, Kumaravadivelu (2012) suggested using *knowing*, which is 'a process', instead of *knowledge*, which is 'a product' (p. 20). He also argued that because teacher knowledge is 'all fragmented', research 'can at best reveal only partial knowledge' (p. 23). Thus, within the scope of teacher education, he proposed a set of "manageable, and yet meaningful types of knowledge' (p. 24). They include professional, procedural and personal knowledge. These three types of knowledge are well interrelated and influence each other. In the context of second language teacher education, professional knowledge includes knowledge about language, knowledge about language learning, and knowledge about language teaching, which are produced and delivered by the experts. Procedural knowledge consists of 'knowledge and ability to manage classroom language classrooms' (p. 31) in order that students' 'desired learning outcomes are made possible' (p. 29). Classroom management strategies are best developed within a specific teaching and learning context that the teacher engages in. The third type of knowledge constituting teachers' knowing is personal knowledge, which pertains to the teacher's 'sense of

plausibility' that Prabhu (1990) highlighted in the field of language teaching. Kumaravadivelu (2012) claimed that personal knowledge or sense of plausibility is an individual endeavour that each teacher needs to develop by engaging in 'critical inquiry and thoughtful reflections' on his or her teaching (p. 32). The teacher develops his or her 'sense of what works and what does not work' (p. 34) in a particular teaching context. It appears that the three types of knowledge offer a simple framework to understand the complex nature of teacher knowledge or the knowing process, which is interconnected with other important skills or senses including analysing, recognising, doing and seeing (see Figure 3.1).

The above-mentioned frameworks highlight a teacher's ongoing learning process and active agency in developing their knowledge. These frameworks of teacher knowledge also emphasise the interrelationship between teachers, learners and context in which teaching and learning happen, as well as teachers' personal experiences and social interactions. The knowledge that language teachers need to develop goes beyond the expert knowledge obtained in their teacher training programs. From the interpretive epistemological stance of the sociocultural turn, language teacher knowledge 'is socially constructed and emerges from social [teaching] practices that [teachers] engage in' (Johnson 2009, p. 9), rather than being an isolated attempt to 'access to unique knowledge about teaching' (Freeman 2002, p. 8). Thus, knowledge can be gained when teachers actively engage in a particular professional learning community to share and nurture their knowledge (Klein, Connell & Meyer 2005). Through dialogic exchanges within their communities, teachers are provided with environments in which to share what they know and to learn from those who share a domain of interest and repertoire (Wenger 1998) in order to understand the values, assumptions and interpretations of their pedagogical activities and the issues relating to their social status and power. As a result, legitimacy of their teacher knowledge can be obtained.

It has been argued that most of the new ELT methodologies have been developed in Britain, Australasia and North America (BANA countries) and may

be impractical and ineffective in non-BANA countries (Holliday 1994a, 1994b; Kumaravadivelu 2003). English language teachers returning from BANA training programs to teach in non-BANA countries need to modify and adapt the different teaching methods to accommodate their particular teaching situations (Chowdhury & Le Ha 2008; Holliday 1994b; Pennycook 1989; Pham 2005, 2007b).

English language teachers in Vietnam have faced difficulties in implementing BANA methodologies. For example, research shows the challenges that Vietnamese teachers have had in using the Communicative Language Teaching Approach (CLTA) in their English language lessons. In a study conducted in Vietnam when they delivered a CLTA workshop for Vietnamese EFL teachers, Lewis and McCook (2002) found that teachers were eager to try out newly learned and updated knowledge while attending CLTA workshops; however, their eagerness to try out the newly learned knowledge faded upon returning their daily teaching. Other research has revealed that Vietnamese teachers failed to conduct communicative activities due to their large class sizes and language-based examinations (Pham 2005, 2007a, 2007b). Concerns about using BANA methods of ELT have also been expressed in other Asian countries. Talking about their implementation of CLTA, English teachers in Bangladesh found it almost impossible to expect 'student-centred teaching' or give up their authoritative and nurturing role of a 'father figure' because of their cultural beliefs about the teachers' and students' roles (Holliday 1994a, p. 310). Similar issues have been recognised elsewhere in Asia, where teachers are confronting the challenges of ELT, including teachers' workload, low support for students' creative work, highly-packed curriculums, and the pressure of high-stake examinations (Lin 2012a). These challenges cannot be solved overnight; therefore, it is requisite for the English language teachers in these countries to develop their own appropriate methods (Holliday 1994a; Kramsch & Sullivan 1996). This is what Chen (2010) referred to as 'Asia as method' in suggesting teachers' critical proposition to transform existing knowledge and transform themselves (cited in Lin 2012b, p. 153). The English teachers themselves need

to reconstruct the BANA methodologies to fit well the particular social and cultural features of their Asian countries.

Critiques about the transferability of expert knowledge are well documented in the literature of English language teaching and learning, but there is a dearth of empirical data on how the language teachers learn to develop their 'Asia as method'. This research aims to explore how Vietnamese primary English language teachers (PETs) in Thanh Van learn to socially construct pedagogy that is appropriate to their Vietnamese primary school students.

In summary, teacher knowledge has been redefined over time in ways that acknowledge teachers' mental lives, practical experiences, context sensitivity and social interactions. The reconceptualisation of teachers' knowing and knowledge has shed light on viewing how teachers should learn. For these reasons, this investigation of Vietnamese PETs' learning in their PLCs is significant.

3.4.3 Language teacher identity

The focus of my research is to examine how Vietnamese PETs learn to teach by participating in their PLCs. However, the notion of teacher identity is important in this research because changing identities is a feature of teacher professional learning (Hoban 2007; Olsen 2008; Sachs 2005). Therefore, upon uncovering teachers' learning processes, it will be necessary to trace the development of teachers' identities through their professional learning. Reviewing the literature on how teacher identity is defined and constructed will help develop my understanding of the notion of teacher identity.

The epistemological stance of a sociocultural turn on teacher learning has shed light on how teacher identity is conceptualised. Teacher identity has been defined in different ways by educational researchers (e.g., Kumaravadivelu 2012; Olsen 2008; Sachs 2005). In emphasising its dynamic nature, Olsen (2008) considers teacher identity as both a product and a process in its formation. He views identity as a label for the collection of effects from

immediate contexts that include the teacher's self and social position. He claims that these factors 'become intertwined inside the flow of activity as a teacher simultaneously reacts to and negotiates given contexts and human relationships at given moments' (p. 139). Likewise, Sachs (2005) emphasises the dynamic features of teacher identity. He proposed a clear and concise definition of teacher identity:

Teacher professional identity stands at the core of the teaching profession. It provides a framework for teachers to construct their own ideas of 'how to be', 'how to act' and 'how to understand' their work and their place in society. Importantly, teacher identity is not something that is fixed, nor it is imposed; rather it is negotiated through experience and the sense that is made of that experience. (p. 15)

Sachs's definition is simple in language, but clearly conveys multiple dimensions of teacher identity and its dynamic development. This definition has enlightened my understanding of teacher identity. Holding to a professional identity, teachers learn 'how to be', 'how to act' and 'how to understand' their profession. These actions then determine their teaching performance as well as their professional learning.

In his framework of language teacher education, Kumaravadivelu (2012) highlights the fluid, multiple and expansive nature of teacher identity. He insists that the process of becoming is 'non-linear, unstable and continuous' (p. 57) and identity construction is complex. Language teacher's identity formation 'resides largely in how they make sense of the contemporary realities and how they negotiate contradictory expectations, and how they derive meaning out of a seemingly chaotic environment' (p. 58). In this process, teachers are 'not functioning as isolated individuals, [but engaged in critical negotiations of meaning with those who] 'share their personal and professional space' (p. 59).

For the purposes of my study, these definitions of teacher identity do not propose a clear-cut account of teacher identity because such an account would be 'hard to reach' (Beauchamp & Thomas 2009, p. 176). This matches what

Beijaard, Meijer, and Verloop (2004) found in their review of research on teacher identity. They noted that several studies were not based on an explicit definition of teacher identity, but viewed teacher identity as similar to certain aspects, roles or characteristics that are found relevant by teachers. On the other hand, the above-mentioned definitions reflect the shared features of teacher identity, that it is dynamic, fluid and complex. Kumaravadivelu (2012) emphasises social interactions in the development of teacher identity.

In their reviews of previous studies, Beijaard, Meijer, and Verloop (2004) and Beauchamp and Thomas (2009) articulated similar features of teacher identity: teacher identity is dynamic and unfixed, personal and contextualised, incorporating sub-identities, and depending on teacher agency (Beijaard, Meijer & Verloop 2004) or 'dynamic ... and shifts over time under the influence of a range of factors, both internal and external to the individual' (Beauchamp & Thomas 2009, pp. 176-7). Rodgers and Scott (2008) included these shared features of teacher identity among the 'basic assumptions' of contemporary conceptions of teacher identity, namely,

(1) identity is dependent upon and formed within multiple contexts which bring social, cultural, political, and historical forces to bear upon that formation; (2) identity is formed in relationship with others and involves emotions; (3) identity is shifting, unstable, and multiple; (4) identity involves the construction and reconstruction of meaning through stories over time. (p. 733)

It is necessary to create opportunities to facilitate the development of these features of teacher identity. For Beauchamp and Thomas (2009), teacher education programs may be 'the ideal starting point for instilling not only an awareness of the need to develop an identity, but also a strong sense of the ongoing shift that will occur in that identity.' (p. 186)

In line with the 'sociocultural turn' in second language teacher education, a large amount of research on language teacher identity has been conducted. Studies show that teacher identity may be shaped and reshaped while teachers are

doing their teaching (Kanno & Stuart 2011; Liu & Xu 2011, 2013; Tsui 2007). Teachers have experienced identity crises or conflicts while coping with reforms in their workplaces (Liu & Xu 2011, 2013; Tsui 2007). They often live with multiple identities (Tsui 2007) or two conflicting identities in the new work context of 'one community, two systems' (Liu & Xu 2013, p. 180) and therefore may need to shift their identities to survive. In contrast, based on the teaching experience of two English language teachers in America, Kanno and Stuart (2011) found that the process of learning in practice can shape teacher identity. They concluded that teaching intensively, identifying what was important in their teaching, and developing an area of expertise were factors from practice that shaped these two teachers' identities as teaching professionals.

In addition, although 'identity may not always be an explicit part of the plan for teacher development' (Beauchamp & Thomas 2009, p. 185), research shows that language teachers' identity undergoes positive change or emerges when the teachers engage in collaborative professional learning activities (Farrell 2011; Samimy et al. 2011). After conducting a three-and-a-half-year longitudinal study, Samimy et al. (2011) found that collaborative learning opportunities, including discourses in a seminar, mentoring relationships with a non-native English-speaking (NNES) TESOL faculty member, and a supportive community enabled three NNES teachers 'to imagine more positive and empowering identities as TESOL professionals' (p. 570). They moved from the 'periphery in their classes linguistically, culturally, and psychologically' to 'legitimate English users' with 'a more hopeful self-image' (Samimy et al. 2011, p. 570). Likewise, Farrell (2011) reported that after engaging in systematic reflective practice within a facilitated teacher group, experienced ESL teachers in Canada became aware of their identity roles and the development of these roles during their teaching.

In summary, the literature shows that teacher identity is multiple, dynamic, unfixed, contextualised, social, and it is shaped and reshaped through teaching and professional opportunities. This study provides more empirical evidence of

this complex conceptualisation of teacher identity. The next section explores the features, activities and impacts of effective professional learning.

3.5 Effective professional learning: features, activities and impacts

3.5.1 Features of effective professional learning

Various features and characteristics of professional learning have been documented in a wide body of literature.

Proposing a framework for professional learning design for science and mathematics teachers, Loucks-Horsley et al. (2010) highlighted the significance of four inputs in the design process that professional developers need to consider, namely, 'knowledge and beliefs, context, critical issues and strategies' (p. 2). These authors also suggested asking questions relevant to each of the four inputs when designing professional learning programs. The questions are respectively: 'What knowledge should inform us, based on the research?' 'What is needed most in our local context, and what resources and conditions may support or threaten us?' 'How certain conditions should be addressed to better ensure our success?' and 'Which strategies, and in what combination, will contribute to enhanced teacher learning and practice?' (pp. 2-3). Answers to these questions significantly influence each action in their design process (see Loucks-Horsley et al. 2010 for further details). Similarly, Richards and Farrell (2005) emphasise the pivotal role of analysing the goals, needs, participants and support when deciding the appropriate strategies of professional learning for English language teachers; such analyses involve both teacher and institutional perspectives.

In addition, different sets of specific characteristics of effective professional learning are proposed by other educational researchers (Bax 1995; Department of Education and Training 2005; Hawley & Valli 1999; Hayes 1995; Little 1993; Veen, Zwart & Meirink 2012). Despite being viewed differently by researchers, effective professional learning activities share characteristics that encompass

the basic tenets of teacher learning from a sociocultural perspective (Johnson 2009). These shared features are continuity, inquiry based, mutual engagement, individual and context accounts, and internal and external support. I believe that as a basis for professional learning activities these principles are general guidelines only and need tailoring for specific social, cultural and political contexts and for particular teachers' inquiries, professional learning activities and their impacts.

3.5.2 Professional learning activities

From a sociocultural perspective, Johnson (2006) has argued that in order to get the full benefits of professional learning activities, the boundaries of professional development should be redrawn. Sites of teacher learning go beyond 'visible professional development activities' (p. 243) in which teachers passively receive experts' knowledge and are unlikely to make any transformations in their teaching. Being 'active mediators of knowledge and constructors of new knowledge' (Johnson 2009, p. 98), teachers need to 'talk, think, try and hone new practices' in collaboration with others (Lieberman 1995, p. 69). Therefore, their learning sites are not limited to their classrooms, but are open to other social contexts in their schools and wider communities. These parallel learning communities help not only to nourish their ongoing development and but also to support changes in teaching practice (Aubusson, Ewing & Hoban 2009). For these reasons, teacher learning opportunities should 'allow for self-directed, collaborative, inquiry-based learning' (Johnson 2006, p. 243) that is directly related to teachers' classrooms. In such learning opportunities, teachers are able to participate actively to examine and interpret the complexities of their teaching practice (Burbank & Kauchak 2003).

The literature suggests there are various professional learning strategies that meet these requirements. In contrast to 'direct teaching' strategies, Lieberman (1995) suggested two lists of learning strategies: in and out of school. Examples of in-school learning strategies are *critical friends*, *peer coaching*, *action research*, *sharing experience*, and *problem solving groups*. Examples of out-of-

school learning strategies are *reform networks, school/university partnerships, subject matter networks, informal groups, and collaborations* (see Lieberman 1995, p. 70 for a full list). Subsequent researchers have suggested similar strategies to enhance teachers' professional learning in the light of a sociocultural perspective, including *self-monitoring, teacher study groups, teaching journal, peer observation, teaching portfolios, critical incidents, case analysis, peer coaching, team teaching, and action research* (Richards & Farrell 2005). Added to these, the Victoria Department of Education and Training (2005) suggested two other learning activities, namely *lesson study* and *professional learning teams*. Aubusson, Ewing and Hoban (2009) have also listed examples of professional learning strategies, including *reflection, discussion, action in classroom in practice, new ideas or conceptual inputs, teacher feedback and working with colleagues on targeted workplace projects*.

As a response to the reconceptualisation of teacher knowledge from a sociocultural perspective, several professional learning activities have been suggested in the literature and studied in different contexts.

3.5.3 Effective professional learning activities

Professional learning is considered to be a vital factor in improving educational quality. A number of studies have examined the kinds of common professional learning activities that are beneficial to teachers' knowledge and practice (Boyle, Lamprianou & Bolye 2005; Garet et al. 2001) and students' learning outcomes (Meiers & Ingvarson 2005; Timperley et al. 2007; Yoon et al. 2007).

Large-scale quantitative studies conducted in the United States (Desimone et al. 2002; Garet et al. 2001), the United Kingdom (Boyle, Lamprianou & Bolye 2005; Boyle, While & Bolye 2004) and Australia (Ingvarson, Meiers & Beavis 2005; Yates 2007) have suggested similar accounts of the types and effects of learning activities. Desimone et al.'s (2002) longitudinal study revealed that professional learning is effective in changing teachers' classroom practice if the activities encourage teachers' 'collective participation ... active learning opportunities ... and coherent linking with other professional activities' (p. 102). For instance, it

was effective for teachers of the same grade students to collectively review their students' work. Boyle, Lamprianou & Bolye (2005) reported similar results on the impact of professional learning activities on teacher change in their longitudinal study with primary and secondary teachers across England. They suggested that *colleague observation* and *sharing practice* were the most common and long-term professional development activities that resulted in 'changes in one or more aspects of their teaching practice' (p. 20). Meanwhile, *coaching* and *research inquiry* were reported to be the most effective activities for these teachers.

Examining the effects of professional development programs on teachers' knowledge, practice and efficacy in four Australian studies, Ingvarson, Meiers and Beavis (2005) consistently found *content focus*, *active learning*, *follow-up knowledge* and *professional community* to have positive impacts. This accords with the outcomes of Yates' (2007) study that long-term activities with a specific focus significantly contributed to teachers' professional growth and were more applicable to their work.

Other studies have shown that teacher professional learning opportunities may expand beyond the border of one school. Teachers have learned through the networking of teachers from different schools (Warren 2009) or in partnerships between university and schools (Burbank & Kauchak 2003). Holding to the core premise of a sociocultural perspective on teacher learning – collaborating, sharing and scaffolding – a project of Transformative Teaching in the Early Years Mathematics was developed by Education Queensland to help teachers to learn new mathematical knowledge and pedagogical knowledge (Warren 2009). It involved six Year 1 Mathematics teachers in three schools in Queensland, Australia, who worked collaboratively with the full support of an expert 'to develop learning experiences for implementation in their classrooms' (p. 36). The teachers moved 'from being under-confident novices to experts in their chosen content areas' and became willing 'to experiment [in mathematics] in the classroom and allow students' conversations to play a more directive role in classroom interplay' (p. 43). In a similar vein, Burbank and Kauchak (2003)

conducted a series of quantitative and qualitative studies on how pre-service and in-service teachers benefited from school-university partnerships, specifically action research teaming or collaborative action research. They found that both pre-service and in-service teachers had positive perceptions of this collaborative action research. The teachers learned to examine, analyse and reflect on their teaching, which resulted in changes in their teaching practice and views about research and teaching.

The above-mentioned literature shows that professional learning activities have attracted much research interest. However, such large-scale quantitative studies may have failed to demonstrate specifically how the professional learning activities benefited teachers. Qualitative research with observations and in-depth interviews may draw a clearer picture of teacher learning and changes in practice. Another limitation is that the collaborative and inquiry-based professional development activities were investigated mainly in BANA countries, but not widely in non-BANA countries.

3.5.4 Professional learning in non-BANA countries

There is limited research examining professional learning activities that have stimulated teachers' 'self-directed, collaborative, inquiry-based learning' (Johnson 2006, p. 243) in non-BANA countries. These studies seem to show ambivalent results. In Turkey, English language teachers rated ongoing and collaborative professional development activities at a very low level of importance for their professional development, and preferred conventional development activities such as mentoring, teaching portfolios and in-service trainings as their preferred professional development strategies (Hismanoglu 2010). The argument for this tendency is the lack of collaboration among teachers in Turkey. Hayes (2008a) found teachers in Korea experienced a similar situation: they preferred formal courses or mentoring by an experienced teacher, although a small number of teachers collaborated with other teachers.

Similar issues have also been found in the Vietnamese context, where much effort has been made to improve the situation of underqualified teachers

(Baldauf et al. 2011; Nunan 2003). As noted in Chapter 2, collaborative and inquiry-based professional learning activities such as critical friends or teacher communities have only recently arrived in Vietnam. However, ambivalent outcomes were reported in a number of empirical studies conducted in Vietnam by both foreign scholars (Hanamo 2008; Saito, Khong & Tsukui 2012; Saito & Tsukui 2008; Saito, Tsukui & Tanaka 2008; Trinh & Laws 2010) and by local researchers (Cham 2013; Le & Nguyen 2012; Nguyen 2016; Vo & Nguyen 2010).

There are reports that Vietnamese teachers in these innovative learning activities experienced challenges such as having evaluation-oriented feedback from peers (Le & Nguyen 2012; Saito, Tsukui & Tanaka 2008), lack of trust and collegiality among colleagues (Le & Nguyen 2012; Saito & Tsukui 2008), lack of dialogue among teachers (Saito, Tsukui & Tanaka 2008), and difficulty in changing teachers' habits and beliefs about learning (Saito & Tsukui 2008). The issue of limited professional interactions was also found to prevent novice EFL teachers from socialising into a community of teachers in secondary schools in Vietnam (Bao 2013).

Other studies, however, have reported positive impacts of such innovative activities (Nguyen 2016; Trinh & Laws 2010; Vo & Nguyen 2010). After conducting a case study with four beginner English language teachers, Vo and Nguyen (2010) found that without a hierarchy of expertise among the peers, critical friends groups developed in a Vietnamese context as a democratic, reflective and collaborative community of learners that helped improve these teachers' performance. The positive impact of collaborative learning on teacher professional growth and teacher identity development was also reported by Vietnamese teachers in an international collaborative partnership (Trinh & Laws 2010) and in a local community of primary English language teachers (Nguyen 2016). These findings show that while a culture of collaboration does not seem common in Vietnam, some teachers there have affirmed its value for their professional learning.

In summary, from a sociocultural perspective, teacher learning is defined as an ongoing process, and involves the active role of learners in deciding their learning focus and format. It emerges from the social context and is embedded in teachers' practice. This perspective of teacher learning, with its relevant principles and activities, has been moulded by educational researchers from BANA countries and widely studied in those countries, but not yet widely taken up in other parts of the world, particularly in Vietnam, where traditional formal in-service teacher trainings are most common. This research aims to contribute additional empirical evidence of how collaborative teacher learning fits in the context of Vietnamese teachers' learning.

3.6 Professional learning communities

Among the above-mentioned collaborative professional learning activities, the activities of PLCs have become more common. I have reviewed a large body of literature on this activity to provide a conceptual framework that guides my analysis of PLCs in a particular Vietnamese context. In order to identify the gaps in the literature that my research aims to address, in this section I discuss how PLCs have been defined and characterised by educational researchers, how they are implemented, and their benefits to teachers and students in various contexts.

3.6.1 Definitions of professional learning communities

Reflecting the nature of social and situated learning in communities of practice, described by Wenger (1998), different terms have been coined to describe the professional learning activities that teachers interact with to learn from each other. These are Professional Communities of Learners (Astuto et al. 1993), Teacher Communities (Grossman, Wineburg & Woolworth 2001; Little 2005), Professional Communities (Little 2012) and Professional Learning Communities (DuFour 2004; Hargreaves 2007; Mitchell & Sackney 2011; Stoll 2011; Stoll et al. 2006; Stoll & Louis 2007). The latter term, 'professional learning communities', has been used in different ways in the literature (DuFour 2004).

Emphasising the outcomes of PLCs, Hargreaves (2007) found that they

brought teachers and others together to work collaboratively for the benefit of improved student learning and achievement ... PLCs created structures, cultures and leadership that promoted rich conversations, and stimulating, challenging, rewarding professional relationships among teachers. (p. 182)

The focus and mode of learning are reflected in Stoll and Louis's (2007) sense of the term. Here PLC signals that

focus is not just on individual teachers' learning, but on (1) professional learning; (2) within the context of a cohesive group; (3) that focuses on collective knowledge; and (4) occurs within an ethics of interpersonal caring that permeates the life of teachers, students and school leaders. (p. 3)

Stoll (2011) later proposed a comprehensive definition to describe the nature of ongoing, reflective, collaborative, inclusive, learning-oriented and growth-promoted learning in a PLC. He explained:

despite the nuances of interpretation, there is increasing international consensus that the term PLC refers to an inclusive and mutually supportive group of people with a collaborative, reflective and growth-oriented approach towards investigating and learning more about their practice in order to improve pupils' learning. (p. 104)

Each of the above-mentioned definitions has its own way of interpreting how a PLC works as learning sites for teachers. However, they share a common notion that the purposes of a PLC do not lie only at improving teaching and learning practice, but also at changing school culture and promoting collegiality among teachers within a school. The interactive, collaborative and learning-focused nature of teacher learning is particularly apparent in a PLC. Holding to these clear purposes, PLCs therefore differ from other kinds of teachers' gatherings in school, as Grossman, Wineburg and Woolworth (2001) have argued. The PLCs

gather together teachers and other people who share a domain of interest in learning to improve teaching and learning (Wenger 1998) or 'a set of values, norms, and orientations towards teaching, students and schooling' (Achinstein 2002, p. 241).

These definitions of PLCs were mainly proposed from the outcomes of studies conducted in Britain, Australasia and North America (BANA countries). Stoll et al. (2006) have argued there is no universal definition of a PLC. One definition may work well in a particular context but not in another. It is because 'in community as in clothing, one size does not fit all' (Grossman, Wineburg & Woolworth 2001, pp. 961-2). One model of community developed for one group of teachers may not work for others. As a researcher studying how the PLCs work as learning sites for primary school English language teachers learning to teach from their secondary teaching backgrounds, I have searched for a definition of PLCs as a starting point from which I could investigate them and their particularities. Stoll's (2011) definition seems more comprehensive than the other definitions because it describes questions of who, what and how of teacher learning in a community beyond the scope of a school. Hence, I adopt his definition in this study of how PLCs work as learning sites for the PETs in Thanh Van in Vietnam.

3.6.2 Features of professional learning communities

Along with the definitions of PLCs, a number of their features have been explored by educational researchers (Aubusson, Ewing & Hoban 2009; DuFour 2004; Grossman, Wineburg & Woolworth 2001; Hargreaves 2007; Stoll 2011). DuFour (2004) has argued that the term PLC should not be used to describe 'every imaginable combination of individuals with an interest in education' (p. 1). PLCs should account for three core factors: 'ensuring that students learn, a culture of collaboration and focus on results' (p. 1). This lends support to the claim that 'not all gatherings of teachers ... constitute a professional community [that] must be concerned with its clientele, namely the students and teachers as life-long learners' (Grossman, Wineburg & Woolworth 2001, p. 951). In other

words, the wellbeing of students and the improvement of professional practice are the two most significant goals of forming PLCs.

In line with these two main goals, a number of features have been proposed in order to distinguish PLCs from every imaginable combination of individuals or gatherings of teachers. Stoll et al. (2006) suggested five intertwined characteristics of PLCs that were confirmed by their earlier research (Bolam et al. 2005): shared values and vision; collective responsibility; reflective professional inquiry; collaboration, and the promotion of both group and individual learning. Stoll (2011) later added trusting relationships as the sixth feature of a PLC: trust is 'sometimes seen as a precondition for developing PLCs' (p. 106). The significance of trust in PLCs has been highlighted by other researchers. For Hargreaves (2007), trust is 'the backbone of a strong and sustaining PLC ... and takes time and effort to build' (p. 187), and for O'Neill (2002), it is 'valuable social capital and not to be squandered... hard earned and easily dissipated' (p. 4). The impact of trust on PLCs will be further discussed in Section 3.6.3.

Viewing teacher community as a condition for action learning, Aubusson, Ewing & Hoban (2009) have suggested features of PLCs that are similar to those mentioned above, though they are expressed in different ways. These features include 'conversations seeking understanding of matters of significance to the community, collective expertise surpassing that of individuals, scrutiny of beliefs, practices, and outcomes, an improvement orientation and mutual respect' (p. 58) They also expect 'collaboration, open and frank exchange of ideas and practices, enquiry using evidence to inform and guide change, shared responsibility, reflection, and action' in PLCs (p. 60).

The features of effective PLCs have also been viewed from the perspectives of how to develop and sustain PLCs, and researchers have proposed lists of the benefits that PLCs can bring about. These include depth, breadth or width, endurance, justice, diversity, resourcefulness and conversation (Hargreaves 2007) and dialogue and participation; relationships; perspectives; structure and

context; climate; purpose and control (Cassidy et al. 2008). Katz and Earl (2010) conducted a large-scale survey of 60 networks, including 662 schools in England, in order to test their theory of action for networked learning communities. This theory incorporates six key enablers for successful networked learning communities, namely purpose and focus, relationships, collaboration, enquiry, leadership and capacity building and support. The findings of the survey suggest that learning communities at schools happen with these features and are 'significantly related to pupil outcomes and to changes in thinking and practice' (p. 42).

Hargreaves (2007) has argued that 'becoming a PLC was a voluntary or invitational process' (p. 183). I personally believe this to be dependent on a particular school's context because PLCs in Vietnam are implemented as part of departmental or government policy of professional development. So far, there has been no research examining how this compulsory nature of PLCs in Vietnam can work as a professional learning activity for teachers.

3.6.3 Leadership

Understanding the role and dimensions of leadership is crucial in any analysis of teachers' professional learning. In this study, it is important to look at what types of leadership are evident in the operations of the PLCs. The form of the study's PLCs and their on-going development are intricately connected to the particular type of leadership in play. Much research has been conducted in this area, for example, Timperley (2011) has suggested that leaders actively engage in 'the cycles of inquiry' to promote teachers' professional learning (p. 119). Stoll (2011) found that leaders are involved in the interconnected processes of PLC development. These include sharing a student learning focus, cultivating involvement and distributed leadership, nurturing respectful, trusting relationships, promoting collaborative enquiry that leads to deep learning, seeking evidence about PLC processes and outcomes, ensuring supportive structures, and drawing on external facilitators and critical friends.

Leadership takes many forms. It can be referred to as the control or supervision of a small number of people in developing, monitoring, and facilitating communities. These people can be a leader from a Department, a school principal, or the leader of a community, who are officially designated for their position. They are known as 'formal leaders' (Katz & Earl 2010, p. 48) or 'heroic leaders' (Camburn, Rowan & Taylor 2003, p. 348). Their responsibilities come from their formal positions in their organisations or communities, this may be referred to as 'headship' (Christie & Lingard 2001, cited in Niesche 2011, p. 42) or 'formal leadership' (Katz & Earl 2010, p. 31). However, it has been argued that if the full potential of PLCs is to be realised, leadership needs to be understood beyond the 'model of a single heroic leader standing atop a hierarchy, bending the school community to his or her purposes' (Camburn, Rowan & Taylor 2003, p. 348) and be distributed across the members (Stoll 2011). Leadership needs to 'comprise dynamic interactions between multiple leaders and followers' (Timperley 2005, p. 396). In an ideal sense, it is the learning tasks or problems that decide 'who leads and who follows' (Copland 2003, p. 378). Leadership of this kind is referred to as informal or distributed leadership (Katz & Earl 2010; Stoll 2011; Timperley 2005).

Research supports the view that informal or distributed leadership in PLCs is more efficient and productive than hierarchical or formal leadership for teacher learning. For example, in his review of studies on PLCs, Westheimer (2008) argued that professional culture in a school needs to support 'collaborative leadership' (p. 764). Teachers should be actively involved in their learning process by sharing their teaching decisions and collectively reflecting on school policies that are strongly associated with changes in their practice. An example of how distributed leadership impacts the success of PLCs comes from a study conducted in New Zealand by Timperley and Parr (2009). They reported the outcomes of two initiatives aimed at improving literacy among students in a national project. The evidence showed that the first initiative was not successful: 'the desired outcomes for students did not eventuate' (p. 139). This was due to the fact that principals and school leaders were the leaders of

instructional practices and no evidence about student learning was used to underpin the change process. However, the second initiative had a 'learning-centred leadership and evidence-informed focus' (p. 149). School principals were not considered as the source of influence on teacher thinking and practice, but as literacy leaders and visiting facilitators who worked closely with teachers in their teaching for 'the evidence of student responses to teachers' literacy instruction'. By doing so, 'policy messages were conveyed more clearly and ... translated effectively into classroom practice' (p. 143). As a result, the achievement of students accelerated on average by twice what would be expected over the two-year period.

Despite the positive findings, distributed leadership is seen as a challenging and risky business (Harris & Jones 2010; Katz & Earl 2010; Timperley 2005). According to Timperley (2005), the distribution of leadership 'may result in distribution of incompetence' or 'is only desirable if ... [it] assists teachers to provide more effective teaching to their students' (p. 417). Also, it is challenging to distribute leadership across participants in a community as the participants may be 'reluctant to take on their leadership roles' (Harris 2011, p. 631) and need to develop 'an understanding of how leadership can work' (Katz & Earl 2010, p. 49). While there are clearly some issues with distributed leadership, this study supports a collaborative approach to leadership as the PLCs are designed as a responsive model of professional learning, taking guidance from the participants in terms of content and process. The notions of leadership need to be considered along with those of power and authority as outlined below.

It has been argued that leadership, either formal or informal, is related to the notions of authority, power or influence (Yukl 2002, cited in Niesche 2011) and the way followers expect and respond to the leaders' thinking and behaviours (Timperley 2005). Given this complex relationship, leadership needs to be understood in terms of the relationship among participants and in a specific social and cultural context (Niesche 2011). Teaching and learning are therefore not neutral activities, they take place according to beliefs, values and institutional rules. According to the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, any

learning and teaching situation involves an unequal power relationship and exercises this symbolic violence (cited in Swartz 2012; Widin 2015). This may take the form of simply deciding who speaks and when. As stated above, leadership, expectations of authority and power relationships are interrelated and necessary to consider in the study of the PLCs' operations and learning process.

This study was conducted in Vietnam, where there exists a large power distance (Hofstede, Hofstede & Minkov 2010) and in the Vietnamese culture, 'parents teach their children obedience; older people are both respected and feared' (Hofstede 2011, p. 9). These cultural expectations in Vietnamese society are likely to influence the ways in which leadership and power relationships are exercised in educational settings. Power relationships between teachers and students, trainers and pre-service teachers, and leaders of schools and Departments and in-service teachers are therefore of a hierarchical nature. Thus, in understanding the dimensions of leadership in implementing PLCs as learning sites for Vietnamese teachers, it is necessary to take into account existing cultural expectations of, and power relationships among, the PLC's members. My study aims to contribute empirical evidence on the interrelationship of these three aspects.

As shown above, successful PLCs incorporate a number of features or factors. However, all the features discussed in the literature might not occur in every single existing PLC. Each PLC incorporates certain specific features that fit its social, cultural and political contexts. Therefore, in this study I do not aim to discover the extent to which the PLCs of PETs in Thanh Van reflect the features reviewed in the literature, though the literature offers a framework from which to draw a detailed picture of the features relevant to that particular setting.

3.6.4 Impacts of professional learning communities

PLCs aim to improve their clientele, namely students and teachers (DuFour 2004; Grossman, Wineburg & Woolworth 2001). However, research shows that the PLCs' aims go beyond these two major goals. In his extensive literature

review, Westheimer (2008) synthesised six ‘interconnected goals’ for developing and implementing PLCs (see p. 759 for specific goals). In this section, I discuss the literature on how PLCs affect students’ learning outcomes, transformations in teaching practice, development of teacher identity, and other aspects of teachers’ learning.

3.6.4.1 Enhancing students’ learning outcomes

While not in the scope of this study, it is interesting to note that PLCs have been reported to have positive impacts on students’ outcomes. Based on data from a large-scale survey of 393 schools of different levels and interview-based case studies with 16 school sites in England, Bolam et al. (2005) concluded that ‘the more developed a PLC appeared to be, the more positive was the association with ... pupil achievement’ (p. i). Similarly, Katz and Earl’s (2010) large-scale survey reveals a positive association between teachers’ active engagement in the network and students’ learning outcomes that was not related to teachers ‘having membership in a network of schools’, but to their active participation in it (p. 42). Likewise, the results from studies reviewed by Vescio, Ross and Adams (2008) ‘offer an unequivocal answer to the question ... whether student learning increases when teachers participate in PLCs’ (p. 87). In other words, PLCs play a vital part in improving students’ outcomes, although the significance depends on the PLCs’ implementation and the level of teacher engagement in the PLCs.

3.6.4.2 Transformations in teaching practice

As described in most of the above-mentioned definitions, the concept of PLCs relies on the premise of improving teacher practice. Findings from previous studies indicate that teachers engaging in PLCs or similar activities are likely to experience some changes in their teaching practice (Caldwell 2008; Harris & Jones 2010; Katz & Earl 2010; Pella 2011; Poehner 2011; Vescio, Ross & Adams 2008). Katz and Earl’s (2010) large-scale survey of 60 networks, including 662 schools in England, reveals that more than half of the studied teachers used

innovative approaches in their classrooms, changed their way of thinking about pupil learning, developed a common body of knowledge, used common practices with their colleagues, created innovative ideas or approaches to teaching and learning, expanded what they know about content, and changed their teaching or assessment practices. (p. 43)

However, this survey did not explore the underlying reasons for the remainder of the surveyed teachers not experiencing changes in their teaching. Further research on this issue would provide more convincing evidence on teachers' transformations in practice when engaging in PLCs.

Teachers' specific transformations have been reported in qualitative research. As a key part of the reform process in Wales, PLCs within and across schools demonstrated the potential for creating substantial differences to teachers' practice and school improvement (Dinham, Crowther & Harris 2011; Harris & Jones 2010). The teachers who engaged in the PLCs used different learning and teaching strategies and materials to promote their students' learning.

Transformations in teachers' pedagogy of teaching writing were acknowledged by language teachers engaging in lesson study groups (Pella 2011) and critical friends groups (Poehner 2011). Teachers provided their students with more opportunities to 'make their choices ... or to engage in thinking for writing' after learning to balance direct writing instruction with more independent writing in a lesson study group (Pella 2011, pp. 116-7). Similarly, with her own and the group's professional expertise, one of the teachers engaging in critical friends groups reconceptualised her notion of dilemma and modes of engagement in her classroom and 'increase[d] student agency and help[ed] students develop metacognitive strategies to become more self-directed' (Poehner 2011, p. 201).

Despite the reported transformations in teaching after teachers engaged in PLCs or other collaborative activities, the literature provides only modest evidence that PLCs affect teaching (Vescio, Ross & Adams 2008). My research aims to use the voices of Vietnamese PETs to provide additional accounts of possible transformations within their PLCs.

3.6.4.3 Development of teacher identity

As discussed in Section 3.4.3, teacher identity is dynamic, unfixed, multiple, contextualised, and socially constructed and developed through the teachers' processes of teaching and learning to teach. A substantial number of studies reveal that teachers experienced shifts in their professional identities when participating in PLCs or similar collaborative learning activities. They transformed their perspectives of themselves as teacher professionals (Lambson 2010; Samimy et al. 2011), their professional learning (Bairral 2007; Habhab 2008; Poehner 2011; Snow-Gerono 2005; Tasker 2011; Yildirim 2008; Zellermayer & Tabak 2006), their teaching, and their students' learning (Pella 2011; Tasker 2011).

Samimy et al. (2011) found that non-native-English-speaking (NNES) graduate students experienced positive shifts in both linguistic and professional identities when they engaged in collaborative learning activities. Other researchers also found that teachers who participated in different forms of PLCs valued critical dialogue among colleagues, criticism, and honest or critical feedback that challenged each other's dilemmas or problems and generated changes in their thinking and practice (Bairral 2007; Habhab 2008; Pella 2011; Poehner 2011; Tasker 2011). Criticism was 'seen as means to building relations among teachers' (Habhab 2008, p. 226). Likewise, it was found that PLCs enabled teachers to appreciate 'community' as a way of sharing and supporting each other (Snow-Gerono 2005; Yildirim 2008). In addition, Zellermayer and Tabak's (2006) action research illustrated teacher's change in 'their stance towards professional knowledge, from knowledge for practice to knowledge in practice and knowledge of practice' and developed 'their sense of autonomy' (p. 47).

Transformations in teachers' perspectives on students' learning were also reported in Tasker's (2011) and Pella's (2011) studies. Engaging in a lesson study project helped three EFL teachers in a private language school to interact and negotiate with each other to modify their writing lesson and then 'reshape [their] rethinking about student responsibility' (Tasker 2011, p. 220). In a

similar vein, through engaging in professional development partnership between a university in Northern California and a middle school, four language teachers experienced transformations in their perspectives about students (Pella 2011). They had 'higher expectations of their students' and became more positive about 'students' self-efficacy' by removing their scaffolds and engaging students' thinking more in their writing (pp. 120-2).

The literature shows a record of teacher identity development through collaborative professional activities; however, more empirical evidence about its development in a specific context is still required to uncover the complexity of teacher identity. My study contributes to this inquiry.

3.6.4.4 Other impacts of professional learning communities

As discussed earlier in this chapter, Westheimer (2008) has argued that PLCs have a 'narrow focus on instrumental goals' if their only aim is to improve students' outcomes and teaching practice. The literature shows the impacts of PLCs are more compelling than this.

Trust relationship and a culture of inquiry

Previous research provides evidence that teachers developed trust relationships among colleagues and learned to make inquiries in their PLCs (Habhab 2008; Snow-Gerono 2005; Yildirim 2008; Zellermayer & Tabak 2006). This is known as a 'culture of intellectual inquiry' among teachers (Westheimer 2008, p. 759). Such a culture of inquiry was cultivated among the teachers engaging in Professional Development Schools Partnerships between university and elementary schools in a local district in the United States (Snow-Gerono 2005). These teachers sought 'out of school colleagues and people as resources for their inquiries' (p. 253) and thereby experienced a shift to community and appreciative dialogue with others. Likewise, Habhab (2008) reported that a culture of inquiry was developed in a community of mathematics and science teachers with the help of information technology. The teachers were able to 'create, share, and improve inquiry-based pedagogical practice through

discussions and criticism of each other' (p. 226). This climate of openness and critical conversations led to trust and camaraderie among the teachers, which 'will hopefully encourage a greater level of learning and pedagogical practice knowledge' (p. 226).

Other studies also show that PLCs enable a sense of collegiality and trust among teaching colleagues: the teachers in a PLC developed their ability 'to share, collaborate, understand, and support each other' (Yildirim 2008, p. 250); and a community of teachers learned 'to pose difficult and sometimes painful questions and not to shy away from frustrations, anxieties and disappointments' (Zellermayer & Tabak 2006, p. 43).

A culture of collaboration

Another reported benefit of PLCs is the promotion of collaboration among teachers. In a PLC or other similar learning activities, trusting relationships, cultures of inquiry and collaboration are interconnected and important dimensions of interaction (Habhab 2008; Zellermayer & Tabak 2006). In a community that already has a culture of collaborative inquiry, collegiality and trust relationships among teachers may develop (Bairral 2007; Caldwell 2008; Christie et al. 2007; Katz & Earl 2010; Poehner 2011; Snow-Gerono 2005; Tasker 2011; Yildirim 2008). Within a trusting relationship among members of a PLC or participants of other collaborative activities, teachers may exchange and reflect on their practices (Habhab 2008), reconceptualise each another's dilemmas (Poehner 2011), and share their ideas and problems in order to enhance their subject knowledge (Bairral 2007) or their knowledge and resources to solve problems (Caldwell 2008). Other studies show that teachers valued their collaborative engagement or participative dialogues among colleagues (Christie et al. 2007; Pella 2011; Tasker 2011; Yildirim 2008); shared their experiences, methods and materials (Pella 2011; Tasker 2011), or produced jointly authored articles and papers (Christie et al. 2007).

However, ambivalent results on the association between collaboration and changes in teachers' thinking and practice were also reported. In one study

(Zellermayer & Tabak 2006), collaborative inquiry had a strong association with students' outcomes and teachers' changes in thinking and practice, while in another large-scale survey (Katz & Earl 2010) collaboration had a weak association with teachers' thinking and practice. Given that collaboration is an important factor or benefit of PLCs, the specific contexts of networks and communities need to be accounted for when it is being considered.

To summarise, PLCs have common characteristics, adopt similar processes of development and implementation and benefit their members in similar ways. However, according to Bolam et al. (2005), the practical implications for developing a PLC can 'be only understood and worked out in the specific conditions – like phase, size and location – of particular contexts and settings' (p. i). These requirements apply to this study of how a PLC operated as a learning activity for PETs in Thanh Van, which has social, political and cultural features that are significantly different from those in the United States or England, where the concept of the PLC originated and has been widely studied.

3.7 Summary of the chapter

This chapter has had two purposes. One is to critically review the literature and inform this study's conceptual framework, and the other is to identify how my study contributes to the body of knowledge about teacher professional learning. In reviewing the pertinent literature, I have been able to develop my understanding of the field and establish my rationale for adopting a sociocultural perspective as a theoretical and analytical framework for examining the development of PLCs and teacher learning in the Vietnamese setting. To be specific, this overview of how teacher learning has been reconceptualised over recent decades has enabled me as a researcher to identify the multiple ways that teacher learning occurred in the PLCs I studied. The concepts and features of PLCs suggested in the literature were adopted as a starting point for examining the particularities of the PLCs that have been implemented in Thanh Van. There have been no previous studies of the implementation of PLCs in Vietnam.

From a sociocultural perspective, teacher learning is ‘a long-term, complex, developmental process that is the result of participation in the social practices and contexts associated with learning and teaching’ (Johnson 2009, p. 10). This epistemological stance has urged me as a researcher to contribute more empirical evidence of teacher learning in a specific context by addressing how the Vietnamese PETs, with their training background of English language secondary school teachers, learned to teach in the PLCs. The principles, features and other key constructs of a the sociocultural perspective on teacher learning such as internalisation and mediation, language teacher knowledge, and language teacher identity were drawn on as analytical tools to interpret the PETs’ learning process in the PLCs. The next chapter presents the research methodology employed for this study.

CHAPTER 4: Methodology

4.1 Introduction

As noted in the previous chapter, the Literature Review, this study takes a sociocultural perspective on teacher learning as a theoretical lens to investigate the processes through which the PLCs were implemented as learning sites for PETs in Thanh Van. Thus, this study was designed as a qualitative case study to explore the complexity and situatedness of teacher learning in that particular context. My main attention was on the operations of four PLCs and the learning experience of their teacher learners. In two phases of fieldwork, data were collected through observation and interviews.

This chapter describes and explains the methodological approach of a qualitative case study adopted in this study. In addition, I explain how the case was defined, and following this are the descriptions of the research site, participants, data collection procedure and data analysis. My role as an insider researcher and the issues of validity and reliability are also addressed in this chapter.

4.2 Research design

This section presents a rationale as to why the current study was designed as a qualitative case study.

4.2.1 Qualitative research approach

A qualitative research approach was adopted in this study for two main reasons.

Firstly, 'the philosophical worldview assumptions' (Cresswell 2014, p. 5) brought to this research influenced its research design. As a researcher, I hold the epistemological stance of social constructivism; that is, the meanings of individuals' lived experiences are subjective, varied and multiple (Cresswell 2014). Specifically, this research took a sociocultural perspective, which defines teacher learning as a dynamic, social and complex process emerging from multiple social practices and experiences that teachers engage in (Johnson

2009). From this perspective, qualitative research was adopted as an appropriate approach for this study. Rather than narrowing into a few categories of teacher learning as quantitative researchers often do, this research paradigm allowed for in-depth and detailed understanding or rich descriptions (Cohen, Manion & Morrison 2011; Cresswell 2014; Snape & Spencer 2003) of the complexity of the PETs' learning process in the PLCs. Its meanings were uncovered through the participants' 'actions, non-observable as well as observable phenomena, attitudes, intentions and behaviours' (Cohen, Manion & Morrison 2011, p. 219). These are embedded in the context of the PLCs' activities and teachers' teaching.

Secondly, a qualitative research approach was adopted in this study because of its exploratory and interpretative nature (Cohen, Manion & Morrison 2011; Dörnyei 2007; Holliday 2007). Qualitative research is defined as 'a situated activity' locating the researcher in the world involv[ing] an interpretive natural approach to the world' (Denzin & Lincoln 2005, p. 3). It has an open-research design which leads its researchers 'into unforeseen areas of discovery within the lives of the people being investigated' (Holliday 2007, p. 5). For these reasons, I was able to be at the research site without a prescribed hypothesis in order to explore and interpret the uncharted areas of the PLCs' operations and the PETs' learning. I bore in my mind the assumptions on teacher learning (see Chapter 3) whilst conducting this study; however, I did not know in advance specifically what I would see or look for (Cohen, Manion & Morrison 2011) in the PLCs and the PETs' learning until I was at the research site. Thus, I was likely to explore 'all possible social variables' (Holliday 2007, p. 5) of the dynamic and complex teacher learning. Through observation and interview, two common qualitative data collection tools, I made sense of and interpreted the 'particular or distinctive' of the PLCs and the PETs' learning process as well as explored 'a fuller and richer picture of the participants' perspective' on the PLCs (Croker 2009, p. 9). Put simply, the qualitative research approach located me in the settings of the PLCs and the PETs' learning to inductively develop conceptual categories or patterns of teacher learning in that particular context.

Generally, the openness of qualitative research design and variety of data collection tools helped to explore and interpret all possible social variables of the PETs' dynamic, complex and social learning process.

4.2.2 Case study

Being commonly used in various areas of human inquiry such as psychology, sociology, education and applied linguistics, case study fits well in the constructivism paradigm that this research was based on. The case study was adopted as a research method because of three main reasons.

Firstly, my choice of case study research method depended on the focus of this study, specifically the two research questions. As explained in Chapter 1, the major goal of this research was to investigate how the PLCs have operated as learning sites for the PETs in Thanh Van. It aimed to explore how the PLCs operated in that particular context and in what ways the PLCs allowed for the PETs' professional learning. As Yin (2014) suggested, these research questions of *How* led to the 'relevant' use of the case study research method because they 'seek to explain present circumstance' (p. 4) of the PLCs in the city.

Secondly, the study attempted to collect rich data on the PLCs' operations and affordances for teacher learning through observations of the PLCs' meetings. As a researcher, I had little or no control over the behavioural events which happened in the PLCs. The real-life learning experiences that the PETs had in the PLCs were recorded. As well, taking a sociocultural perspective, teacher learning is context-related and context-dependent; therefore, my understanding of the context was significant in uncovering the PLCs' operations and teachers' learning experiences. These features of my study accord with the first part of Yin's (2014) definition of a case study as an empirical inquiry that

- investigates a contemporary phenomenon in depth and within its real-life context, especially when
- the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident.

(p. 16)

The case study method provided with the unique instances in action of real people: the PETs and leaders in the real situations of the PLCs in a specific context of Thanh Van.

Thirdly, the features of a case study specified in the second part of Yin's (2014) definition helped to explore the dynamic and complex nature of teacher learning. According to Yin (2014), a case study inquiry:

- copes with the technically distinctive situation in which there will be many more variables of interest than data points, and as a result
- relies on multiple sources of evidence, with data needing to converge in a triangulating fashion, and as another result
- benefits from the prior development of theoretical propositions to guide data collection and analysis.

(p. 17)

In a similar vein, Dörnyei (2007) asserted that case study is:

‘an excellent method for obtaining a thick description of a complex social issue embedded within a cultural context. It offers rich and in-depth insights that no other method can yield, allowing researchers to examine how an intricate set of circumstances come together and interact in shaping the social world around us.’ (p. 155)

Thus, adopting a case study research method was relevant to my ‘choice of what to be studied’ (Stake 2005, p. 443). I was able to depict a complex, dynamic and unfolding picture of the PETs’ learning within the complicated circumstances of the PLCs. This was obtained through ‘multiple sources of evidence’ including observations and interviews and through ‘many variables of interest’ (Yin 2014, p. 17) embedded in the complexity of the PLCs’ operations and the PETs’ learning.

This study was designed as a qualitative case study for its objectives and its theoretical framework. A qualitative case study is a logical choice for investigating the dynamic and complex nature of the PETs’ learning specifically situated in the PLCs in Thanh Van.

4.3 Defining the case

This study was designed as an embedded single case study, in which ‘more than one unit of analysis is incorporated into the design’ (Cohen, Manion & Morrison 2011, p. 291). The single case of this study is the PLCs operating in Thanh Van as learning sites for the PETs across the city. In order to uncover the complexity of the PLCs’ operations and PETs’ learning in the PLCs, this study involved different units of analysis including four PLCs as groups, and their stakeholders, including seven PETs, the leaders of four PLCs and the EFL consultant, and obtained rich evidence from observations and interviews. As Yin (2014) suggested, these units of analysis ‘can often add significant opportunities to extensive analysis, enhancing the insights into the single case’ (p. 56). Therefore, a rich and detailed account of the PLCs’ operations and PETs’ learning was obtained.

In defining the case for this study, the principle of ‘judicious balance’ (Holliday 2007, p. 8) was taken into account. This principle is determined by the notion of ‘opportunism’, which is known as the availability of subjects and relationship between the researcher and participants. While developing the research plan, I discussed my proposed study of the implementation of the PLCs in Thanh Van with my colleagues in Vietnam. I then decided to contact the EFL consultant in the Department of Education and Training (DOET) of the city, who supervised all the EFL teaching and teachers’ professional learning activities, about the possibility of investigating the PLCs, which were operating in the city. The EFL consultant knew me as an academic, a lecturer and a researcher at a recognised university in Vietnam, so I easily obtained his strong support. However, in order to gain official access to the research site, I needed to receive high-level official permission from the DOET to work with the PLCs and their participants. The EFL consultant recommended me to the DOET’s leader for their official approval. A summary sheet of my research and a reference letter from my supervisor were sent to the DOET as the official documents informing them of my research. An approval letter was then issued. This approval letter was considered as a ‘passport’ to authorise my fieldwork with the PETs at the PLCs and at their primary schools. This process was necessary because my research

site was in a country where a high-level of formal authority is required to work with their personnel. As a result, I was officially permitted to work with the EFL consultant and the PLCs, which meant that the case of my study was defined. My study investigated the case of the PLCs' activity in Thanh Van.

4.4 Research site

Data collection for this study was conducted in Thanh Van, a pseudonym of a city in Vietnam, which has been well known for its long-established schools with high educational quality and its students' diligence. Thanh Van is one of the major cities in Vietnam where English as a foreign language has been taught in primary schools as an optional subject since the early 1990s (Ha 2006). The MOET's newly-issued primary school English curriculum and textbooks were also piloted in this city. This indicates that the EFL learning and teaching in primary schools in the city has been long established and highly valued in Vietnam.

To be more specific, the present study aimed to investigate an activity called *Sinh hoạt cụm chuyên môn* (Participating in Professional Communities), referred to as Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) in this study (see Chapter 3). As the focus of this study was the operations of the PLCs, the context of the research site was primary schools in Thanh Van, but I did not necessarily remain in the same schools over the two phases of fieldwork. As stated in Chapter 2 (Context), the PLCs have operated as a professional learning activity for the PETs in the city since 2008. Each of the six PLCs in the city involves PETs from seven or eight primary schools and meets once or twice every semester (4 months). The PLCs' meetings occurred at different schools, and so I visited the different schools to observe the PLCs' meetings. In addition to the schools where the PLCs' meetings were held, I collected data from seven PETs selected from the four PLCs by observing and interviewing them at their primary schools, which also brought me to the settings of other primary schools in the city.

Because the context of the research site in this study was different primary schools, it was important to understand fully the conditions of the primary schools in the city. The primary schools in Thanh Van are mainly state run and

can be classified into three types, top-ranked, second-ranked and third-ranked ones. Located in the inner city, the top-ranked schools are well-equipped with high-tech learning and teaching facilities such as computers, projectors, or interactive electronic whiteboards, while the third-ranked schools in the far outskirts provide no more than a blackboard, chalk and a CD player for an EFL lesson. The second-ranked primary schools are located in both the inner city and the outskirts of the city, and are equipped with fewer modern teaching and learning facilities. The students of top-ranked schools mainly come from white-collar and wealthy family backgrounds while the students of the third-ranked ones mainly come from blue-collar and poor ones. The class size of the top-ranked schools is larger than the lower-ranked schools, at 40s and 30s respectively. The learning facilities, students' educational and family backgrounds and class size of the second-ranked schools stand somewhere in the middle. In order to obtain a diverse experience of teacher learning in the PLCs, the PETs from schools of these three types were recruited as explained in the following section.

4.5 Research participants

This section presents the process of recruiting the participants for this study and information about the participants. The participants of this study include PLCs as groups, their leaders, the EFL consultant and individual PETs from the four PLCs.

For their confidentiality, pseudonyms were used to refer to the recruited participants. Pseudo genders were also used to ensure the confidentiality of the recruited leader participants, specifically the EFL consultant and the three PLCs' leaders. *This is a relatively small group of professionals.* The participants' informed consent was orally obtained prior to my presence at the research site. Organising this study from outside Vietnam, I had to contact the participants-to-be via email and telephone before planning my fieldwork. The Vietnamese versions of the information sheet (Appendix D) and consent form (Appendix E), which explain the objectives and plan of this study, were sent to the EFL consultant and the leaders of the four PLCs. The PLCs' leaders helped to pass the

documents to the PETs in their community. That way of accessing the PETs was expected in an avowedly hierarchical system of the DOET and primary schools in the city. To ensure that participants were not coerced to join the research by the leaders, I requested that their consent forms were not signed until I was at the research site to explain to participants in person the objectives and plan of my study. Participants were also informed carefully that they should feel free to withdraw from the study both in the consent form and in person.

Table 4.1: Participants

Roles	Number
1. PLCs as group participants	04
2. EFL consultant	01
3. PLCs' leaders	03
4. Primary EFL teachers (PETs)	07

The participants recruited in this study included the four PLCs, the EFL consultant, three PLCs' leaders and seven PETs as shown in Table 4.1. The next section contains information about the participants and describes the reasons for recruiting them.

4.5.1 The four professional learning communities

Four out of the six professional learning communities (PLCs), which were formed by the DOET in Thanh Van (see Chapter 2), were recruited as group participants for this research. Information on the PLCs is presented in table 4.2 below.

Table 4.2: Professional Learning Communities (PLCs)

PLCs	No of Teachers	No of Schools involved
PLC -A	21	07
PLC - B	18	07
PLC - C	24	08
PLC - D	19	08

Note: Total number of PLCs in the city is 06

The four PLCs were recruited as group participants before I was at the research site. With the DOET's approval (see Section 4.3), I was officially introduced to the leaders of the six PLCs in the city by the EFL consultant. I contacted the leaders via emails and telephone from overseas and was responded to by four out of the six PLCs' leaders. I decided to work with the four PLCs whose leaders responded to my request because four out of the six PLCs could well represent the spread of PLCs in the city. The four PLCs' voluntary participation as groups was then obtained, which facilitated the planning of my fieldwork.

As a researcher, I did not exert any influence on the placement of the participants in each community. The members of each PLC were grouped by the DOET every one or two academic years (see Chapter 2). The members of the PLCs remained unchanged in two academic years 2012-2013 and 2013-2014, when data were collected for this study. As shown in Table 4.2, each community includes approximately twenty PETs from seven or eight schools of varied academic, economic and sociocultural conditions (see Section 4.4). Two PETs in each PLC were assigned to be the leader and vice leader (see Section 4.5.3). Furthermore, each PLC draws a 'coloured' picture of PETs' backgrounds and learning and teaching experience. The PETs' teaching experience ranges from one year to more than ten years. Only a small number of the PETs were trained to teach EFL at primary schools while a majority of them were trained to teach EFL at secondary schools. One or two PETs in each PLC had gained the '*best teacher*' prize of the city or province. Thus, each PLC satisfactorily represents the real situation of PETs in Thanh Van.

In addition to the PLCs as group participants, the EFL consultant, the PLCs' leaders and individual teachers were recruited as individual participants for this study, which will be described in the following sections. It has been suggested that a case study researcher should recruit those who are more accessible and can reserve their time for this study (Stake 2005; Yin 2009; Yin 2014). The research participants were highly represented of the target population. All participants were active members of the PLCs (see Sections 4.5.3 and 4.5.4).

4.5.2 The English as a foreign language consultant

The English as a foreign language (EFL) consultant was contacted at the very early stage of developing this study (see Section 4.3), but not recruited as a participant until I was at the research site in the first phase of my fieldwork.

The EFL consultant, whose pseudonym is Mr Kim, was recruited as a participant for this study because of his involvement in the PLCs and his role of a leader from the DOET. Being an insider researcher (see Section 4.8), I understand that there exists a hierarchy in the Vietnamese educational sector and that teacher learning is embedded in the institutional hierarchies of the Department and the primary schools, where my research was conducted. Because of his central position in the hierarchy, it was important to include the perspective of the EFL consultant, a leader within the Department, who developed, supervised and facilitated the implementation of PLCs as professional learning activity for the PETs in the city.

Specifically, it was the EFL consultant who initiated and developed PLCs for the PETs across the city when he started his position as an EFL consultant at the DOET in 2008 (see Chapter 2). Since then, he has facilitated the PLCs' implementation as a leader from the DOET. In addition, the EFL consultant supervises and evaluates the activities of teaching and learning EFL at primary schools across the city. Therefore, the EFL consultant was expected to be a helpful informant with his thorough understanding of how the PLCs have developed, operated and impacted on the PETs within the social, cultural and political features of the city.

4.5.3 The leaders of professional learning communities

The leaders of professional learning communities (PLCs) were recruited as participants for this study because of their experience in managing the PLCs.

Table 4.3: PLCs' leaders

Leaders - Pseudonyms	Experience in Leading PLCs	Experience in Teaching TEYL
PLC-A's leader - Ms Xuan	Since 2010	16 years

PLC-B's leader - Ms Quyen	Since 2010	11 years
PLC-C's leader - Ms Thi	Since 2010	13 years

At first, four leaders of the four PLCs agreed to participate voluntarily in the research to provide significant information on the PLCs' operations and their experience in leading the PLCs. Unfortunately, the leader of the PLC-D did not want to be interviewed and withdrew from the study as an individual participant; therefore, only three leaders of the PLCs A, B and C participated in this study.

Although the members of each PLC are usually regrouped every one or two years, these three leaders had kept their leadership positions since 2010, when six PLCs in the city were formed (see Chapter 2). These leaders were senior PETs of the city, who had much experience in and updated knowledge of TEYL as they usually attend national and provincial workshops or training programs on this topic. As well, the three leaders were involved in the examination board of the DOET and periodically observed and evaluated the PETs across the city. They seemed to have a good understanding of the practice of primary school EFL teaching and learning in the city. The leaders were also engaged in the PLCs as learners to share their teaching experience and insight into TEYL. Therefore, these leaders were expected to provide detailed and rich information on the operations, benefits, as well as the challenges of the PLCs.

4.5.4 The individual primary school English language teachers

In addition to the PLCs as a group, the PETs from the PLCs were recruited as individual participants in this study for the insiders' voice about the PLCs' operations and their learning experience in this setting.

The individual PETs were not recruited until the first phase of fieldwork. At the end of each first meeting, I explained to the whole PLC my intention of inviting three teachers from different schools to be involved in the study as participants. At the same time, the study's objectives and the PET participants' expected roles were carefully explained. The expected total number of twelve PETs from the four PLCs allowed for the possibility of one or two participants' withdrawal upon collecting data. In the first phase, ten teachers from the four PLCs (two

from PLC-A; three from PLC-B; three from PLC-C and two from PLC-D) were recruited as voluntary participants. However, in the second phase of the research, three of them withdrew due to their limited availability for being observed and interviewed in the second phase of data collection (see Section 4.6). Therefore, only seven PETs were counted as individual PET participants: one PET from PLC-A, two from PLC-B, three from PLC-C and one from PLC-D. The profile of the seven PETs is presented in Table 4.4 below:

Table 4.4: Individual PETs

PETs - Pseudonyms	PLC- School type	Qualification - Year obtained	TEYL experience
1. Thanh	A - type 1	BA in English & TEFL - 2007	03 years
2. Trang	B - type 2	BA in English & TEFL - 2009	<1 year
3. Nga	B - type 2	Diploma in TEFL - 2001 BA in English & TEFL - 2003	09 years
4. Anh	C - type 3	Diploma in TEFL - 2002. BA in English & TEFL - 2005	07 years
5. Lai	C - type 1	BA in English & TEFL - 1998	11 years
6. Thuy	C - type 3	BA in English & TEFL - 2001	6 years
7. Dung	D - type 3	BA in English & TEFL - 2010	<1 year

Note: teaching experience was counted from the first PLCs' meeting observed

As shown in Table 4.4, this research engaged PETs of various professional backgrounds and teaching conditions. Firstly, the recruited PETs were different regarding their teaching experience. All of them had obtained a degree in English and teaching English as a foreign language from a three-year or four-year teacher training programs (see Chapter 2). They were trained to teach EFL to secondary school students, not primary school ones. Their experience in teaching EFL at primary schools ranged from less than one year to more than ten years. Their participation experience in the PLCs matched their years of teaching experience. At the first PLCs' meeting I observed, teacher Trang and teacher Dung were attending for the first time, while the others could not remember how many meetings they had attended. Secondly, these PETs taught at schools of different conditions (see Section 4.4 above). Two of them were from first-ranked primary schools (teacher Thanh and teacher Lai), two from

second-ranked schools (teacher Trang and Nga) and three from third-ranked schools (teacher Anh, teacher Thuy and teacher Dung). With the teacher participants' diversity, this research was well-placed to obtain data on how the PLCs facilitated the professional learning of the teachers across different practices.

In addition to the interview data from the seven PETs participants reported in this thesis, I drew on engagement of the other teacher participants from the four PLCs from the observational data. These teachers were not recruited as individual PETs, but as group participants in their PLC for this research. For the purpose of clarity, pseudonyms are also used to refer to these teachers in the extracts from their interactions but are not described in this section. Their interactions were recognized thanks to the map of the PETs' seats in each meeting (see Section on *Issues in observations*).

In short, this study engaged the four PLCs as group participants, and the EFL consultant, three leaders from three PLCs A, B and C and seven PETs as individual participants. These participants were expected to offer rich and detailed information on the PLCs' operations as learning sites in Thanh Van in Vietnam.

4.6 Data collection

This section presents how data were collected for this study. The procedure of collecting data and the rationale for, benefits of and issues in employing two data collection tools, namely observation and interviews, will be clearly described and discussed.

4.6.1 Data collection procedure

Data collection in this study was conducted in two phases. The first phase was from January to February 2013 and the second phase from late October 2013 to March 2014. In this section, I explain why two phases of data collection were made and how each phase occurred.

4.6.1.1 The first phase

The first phase was conducted for more than two months, in January and February 2013. This phase began immediately after the Ethics application for this study was cleared in late December 2012. The first phase allowed me to familiarise myself with the research site and to obtain broad data for this study. As noted earlier in this chapter, the goal of this study was to explore how the PLCs operated in the particular context of Thanh Van and in what ways the PLCs allowed for the PETs' professional learning. In this phase, I aimed to collect data about the operational aspects of the PLCs, including their structure, the implementation process, the role of the DOET, the EFL consultant and the leaders, and also about the stakeholders' attitudes towards the PLCs. This source of data provided me with necessary information to plan for collecting more data about how the PETs learned in the PLCs in the second phase.

In this phase, one meeting of each PLC was observed and interviews with the EFL consultant, the PLCs' leaders and the individual PETs were conducted.

The procedure of the first phase was as follows:

- a. Observing one meeting scheduled by the four PLCs
- b. Interviewing the PETs.
- c. Interviewing leaders, including the EFL consultant and the PLCs' leaders.

In this procedure, step c was flexible and subject to the respondents' availability. In reality, steps b and c were carried out after step a. The data collected in the first phase were also counted as findings for this study in combination with the data collected in the second phase (see Section 4.6.2 below).

4.6.1.2 The second phase

The second phase was conducted from late October 2013 to March 2014. This was an optimal period during an academic year in Vietnam to collect data for this research. The academic year in Vietnam begins in the middle of August and finishes at the end of May in the following year. As described in Chapter 2, each

PLC was expected to hold one or two activities each semester. Before planning my second fieldwork, I was informed that the PLCs' activities had been tentatively scheduled from late October 2013 to February 2014, but were usually subject to the members' availability. Being present at the research site from late October, I was able to observe the PLCs' meetings held in the two semesters and PETs' teaching at primary schools.

The second phase of data collection was well facilitated by my first phase. After analysing the initial data, I developed a number of broad themes including the *PLCs' development, the implementation of PLC activities, the participants' roles and attitudes and relationships*. These broad themes helped to refine my data collection tools in the second phase. Because the second phase was looking for evidence about the PLCs' affordances on the PETs' learning, I decided to observe the PETs' EFL lessons at primary schools followed by an interview, instead of only interviewing the teachers after the PLCs' meetings. Within the scope of this study, I did not aim to investigate the interrelationship between the PLCs and the teachers' transformation in their practice or to evaluate the practice of the EFL teachings at primary schools in Thanh Van. Hence, the observations of EFL lessons at primary schools were not used as a source of data for this study, but as a stimulus for the PETs' reflections on their learning in the PLCs. The interview questions for the PETs were thereby refined in this phase (see Appendix B).

The procedure of the second phase was as follows:

- a. Observing meeting 1 of the four PLCs
- b. Observing one EFL lesson each delivered by the seven individual PETs at their primary schools
- c. Interviewing the observed teachers straight after each lesson or as soon as possible;
- d. Observing meeting 2 of the four PLCs
- e. Repeating the steps b and c.

This procedure was subject to the PLCs' schedule and the EFL lessons' timetable; however, the steps b and c had to follow step a. In this phase, the

meetings of the PLC-B and D were rescheduled, so I was able to observe only one meeting of each community instead of two as planned. Two interviews for each of the PETs from these two PLCs were conducted after observing the PLCs' meetings.

Data collection in this study was conducted in two phases, including observing the PLCs' meetings, interviewing the EFL consultant, the PLCs' leaders and the PETs. The data collection schedule over the two phases is summarised in Appendix C.

4.6.2 Data collection tools

In this section, I present a rationale of why observation and interview were used to collect data for this study and a description of how these tools were used and what issues were encountered.

4.6.2.1 Rationale for using observation and interviews

Observation and interview were two central sources of qualitative evidence for this research (Silverman 2000). According to Duff (2008), data collection needs to be matched with what the research aims to find out. As explained in Chapter 1, this qualitative case study aimed to investigate how the PLCs have been operating as learning sites for the PETs in the specific context of Thanh Van since 2008. Using both observation and interview enabled me to provide 'rich descriptions' of the PLCs' operations and the PETs' learning process, which are embedded in the context of this major goal. Observation and interviews have their own advantages.

Observation offered me invaluable opportunities to be at the research site to capture most of the phenomena available about the PLCs' operations and PETs' learning in their natural setting that other tools might fail to. These phenomena included the participants' engagement including verbal and non-verbal behaviours and possible learning opportunities. As an observer, I was able to discover the routines of the PLCs' operational aspects and PETs' learning that the participants might have taken for granted or might not be aware of to recall in my interviews. Because of the complexity of interactions amongst

participants, I decided not to use an observation instrument. My field notes recorded detailed physical features that were not captured by the recordings.

Interviews were employed in conjunction with the observation tool (Cohen, Manion & Morrison 2011) to obtain more evidence on the PLCs' operations and the PETs' learning in the PLCs. It would be inadequate for me as a researcher to rely only on the observations of the PLCs' meetings as evidence of the operational aspects of the PLCs. The PLCs had been conducted in the city since 2008 and no documents recording their development and implementation were provided. By interviewing the EFL consultant and the PLCs' leaders, who had been actively involved in developing and facilitating the PLCs' activities since 2008, I was able to unpack the process of developing and implementing the PLCs as learning sites for the PETs and relevant issues.

Furthermore, it has been advised that non-verbal behaviours need to be observed with much caution because they might be misinterpreted (Patton 2002) and that observations should be combined with other tools such as interviews to 'ascertain selected participants' perspectives on their actions or behaviours' (Duff 2008, p. 141). Hence, interviews were used as one primary method to validate the data obtained from observation. My interpretation of the PETs' non-verbal behaviours indicating their engagement in the PLCs such as the participants' attentive quietness in the discussion section, was confirmed by the PETs' sharing in their interviews. The underlying reasons for their behaviours were also discovered.

Importantly, the interview was used as a flexible tool to collect evidence of 'complex and deep issues' (Cohen, Manion & Morrison 2011, p. 409) and cultural aspects related to the PETs' learning. Through interviews, I was able to encourage the informants to share what they actually thought and did in that complex learning process. As an insider researcher and informed by the literature review undertaken for this study, I anticipated that the cultural issues of Vietnamese teachers' lack of collaboration, reluctance to speak openly, and habit of giving evaluation-oriented feedback (Le & Nguyen 2012; Pham 2001; Saito & Tsukui 2008) would affect the studied PETs' learning in the PLCs. They

might not raise their active voice in the PLCs, but still engage in the PLCs as quiet learners. Therefore, the teachers' learning needed to be understood both through their active engagement and other modes of engagement. While data on PETs' active engagement could be obtained through my observation of the PLCs' activities, interviews were an optimal tool to discover other modes of engagement, which took place quietly in the PETs' minds.

As a product of developing data collection tools including observation and interviews that fit specifically to the focus of this study and to the Vietnamese context, much and deep evidence of the complexity and uniqueness of the PLCs' operations and the PETs' learning in that context was obtained. The next sections will continue with the procedure and issues in employing these two data collection tools.

4.6.2.2 Observation

This section presents the procedure and issues in employing observation as a data collection tool in this research.

Procedure

I conducted observations in the two settings including the PLCs' meetings and the PETs' EFL lessons at primary schools. I used my observations of the PLCs' meetings as one source of evidence on the PLCs' operations and the PETs' learning. However, as noted above, observations of PETs' teaching at primary schools were not used as a source of evidence for this study. Observing the PETs' teachings at primary schools provided me with a snapshot of the EFL practice at primary schools and in some ways mirrored the PETs' experience in the PLCs. The PETs were asked to reflect on their learning experience in PLCs through the incidents in their teaching and the demonstration lessons.

My observations of PLCs' meetings were conducted at different primary schools in the city. With the approval of the DOET and the PLCs' participants, I was present at the meetings scheduled by the four PLCs. The meetings took place at the primary schools where EFL demonstration lessons were delivered and observed. Each meeting usually included two sections. After observing the

demonstration lesson, all the participants gathered in a common room or library of the school for the second section, called 'discussion time'. The participants gave feedback on the observed lesson and exchanged ideas about other issues related to their teaching. The two sections lasted for about 90 minutes. In total, I observed ten meetings of the four PLCs over two fieldwork sections (see Appendix A).

When the demonstration lesson was delivered, all the PLCs' participants silently sat at the end of the class to observe and took notes in their observation agenda as a requirement of their professional learning. Seating arrangements for the participants in the demonstration lesson and in the discussion time were usually made as shown in the figures 4.1.a and 4.1.b below.

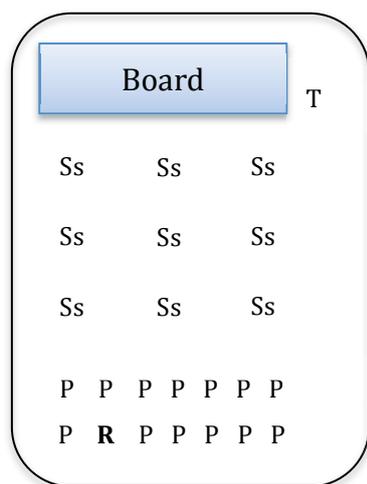


Figure 4.1a: Seating arrangements in a demonstration lesson

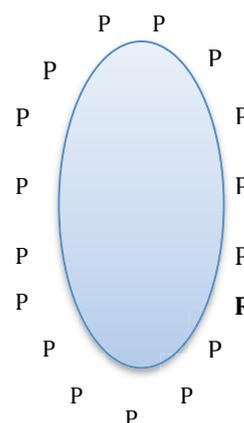


Figure 4.1b: Seating arrangements in discussion time

(Note: T= teacher; Ss = Students; P= PLCs' participants; R = researcher)

My observations of the discussion sections were audio recorded and supplemented by field notes. Firstly, audio-recordings were chosen as they did not greatly disturb the natural setting of a meeting. Placed on a large table around which the teachers were sitting, two audio-recorders recorded all the verbal phenomena during the meetings. Two recorders were used to minimise any technical problems relating to audio-recordings. In addition, field notes were taken of what was heard and seen in the meetings (Silverman 2000) in

order to obtain both verbal and non-verbal evidence of the participants' behaviours, which might have been lost without being video-recorded. My field notes helped me 'contextualise the observed behaviours and to note aspects of the observation that merit follow up' (Duff 2008, p. 140). I did not follow a pre-designed observation sheet while observing the PLCs' meetings. Without a pre-designed observation sheet, I was able to record all the issues, which emerged in the natural setting of a meeting. However, the focus of each phase of data collection (see Section 4.6.1) in some ways guided my observations. In the first phase, I particularly focused on the operational aspects of the PLCs, while the second phase was on the PETs' learning. I expanded my field notes 'beyond immediate observations' (Silverman 2000, p. 141) straight after I left the PLCs' meetings in order to make sure my notes were fully comprehensible and informative.

Issues in observation

Prior to my observations, I anticipated a number of issues in observing the PLCs' meetings. Some other challenges were encountered when I was at the meetings. This section explains what the issues were and how they were dealt with to maximise the effectiveness of observations.

Firstly, I dealt with the issue in recognising the participants' names and engagement in transcribing the recordings and referring to my field notes. A blank sheet was used to quickly map out the seat arrangement of the discussion section when the teachers introduced themselves. Straight after the meeting when the images of the participants were still very fresh in my mind, the recordings were transcribed and my field notes were revised with the participant's names added and expanded with what was missing in my note-taking.

The second issue was in relation to the quality of audio-recordings. There were usually more than twenty people in a meeting and some teachers spoke in a soft voice. In meeting A1, I did not anticipate this issue and had only one recorder, so some parts of the recordings were not clear enough to be transcribed in full. After the meeting A1, I used two recorders to overcome this issue. Furthermore,

occurring at schools and during school hours, the PLCs' meetings were sometimes distracted by the noise from students' break time or concurrence of the students' outdoor activities. The quality of my recordings was therefore affected. In this case, the immediate transcription of the recordings and field notes compensated for this issue.

My third challenge was to capture the most natural behaviours possible in the PLCs' setting. Being a covert observer at the meetings is 'condemned by discipline-based ethics statements of the American Psychological Association' (Patton 2002, p. 270). In collecting data, my observations were completely overt to the participants as a requirement of research conduct and because of my prior relationship with the participants (see Section 4.5). To minimise possible changes in the participants' behaviours when being observed (Patton 2002), I carefully explained to the participants that I would not evaluate how well they performed, but was there to investigate the practice of the PLCs, and asked them to behave in the PLCs as they usually did. As well, being at the research site for an extended period of time in the two fieldwork sections, I tried to interact socially with the participants as much as possible so that they developed trust with me as a researcher and regarded me as an insider of their PLC rather than an outsider. I also 'disguised' myself as a member of the PLCs by mingling among the participants rather than occupying a separate seat in the meeting room (Figures 4.1.a and 4.1.b). It seemed that by the middle of the first meeting I observed, the participants in each PLC paid little attention to my presence and were behaving naturally.

Another challenge was playing the role of a non-participant observer. I tried to stand far enough from, or outside of, the community (Patton 2002) to obtain as much data on the PLCs' operations and PETs' learning in the PLCs as I could. All the participants knew me as an EFL teacher, a teacher trainer and a PhD candidate in a university overseas. They regarded me as an expert in the field of EFL teaching. In the first meeting of each PLC, they kept persuading me to contribute my ideas to the issues discussed in the PLCs or to give feedback on their teachings. I explained to the participants my role as a researcher and asked

them to be tolerant of my silence as an observer. In the following meetings, they no longer asked for my contribution.

In summary, observation was employed to collect data on the PLCs' operations and the PET's learning in the PLCs. The recordings and field notes were used to record both verbal and non-verbal behaviours of the participants in the PLCs. The issues of recognising the participants' names and voices, being an overt and non-participant observer and ensuring the good quality of the recordings were taken into consideration.

4.6.2.3 Interviews

This section presents a detailed account of how interviews were used as a source of evidence for this study and a number of constraints in carrying out the interviews.

Procedure

The interviewees were classified into two groups, the leaders and the teacher learners.

The leaders included the EFL consultant and the leaders of three PLCs A, B and C, who facilitated the development and implementation of the PLCs, on which my interviews focused. The PLC-D's leader declined to be interviewed. The interviews with the leaders were conducted in the first phase of data collection. In the first fieldwork, ten PETs were interviewed, but in the second fieldwork, only seven out of the PETs were interviewed after being observed in their EFL lessons at primary school (see Section 4.5.4). In the first phase, each of the ten PETs was interviewed after the PLCs' meeting. In the second phase, each of the seven PETs was interviewed once after each EFL lesson observed for two or three times in order to obtain richer and deeper evidence of their learning experience in the PLCs. Referring to the broad themes identified after the initial data were analysed (see Section 4.7.1), interview questions for the PETs in the second phase were revised to focus on their engagement, knowledge and identity construction, and benefits for their teaching gained from the PLCs (see Appendix B).

The interviews with all the leaders and PETs occurred in their workplace for their convenience. Each interview lasted for approximately thirty minutes. In the second phase, most of the PETs allocated time for their interviews straight after their observed lessons. The interviewees preferred to be interviewed in Vietnamese. It is a shared native language between the interviewees and the researcher; hence, they were able to express their ideas more fully. The interviews were audio-recorded and scribed with the interviewees' agreement.

Referring to this study's objectives, the questions for the leaders and the teacher participants were designed to be open-ended (see Appendix B). These open-ended questions 'allow[ed] the respondents opportunities to develop their responses in the ways which [I] might not have foreseen' (Campbell, McNamara & Gilroy 2004, p. 99). The interviews were carried out as 'semi-structured' interviews (Duff 2008, p. 133) or with an 'interview guide approach' (Patton 1980, cited in Cohen, Manion & Morrison 2011, p. 413). Therefore, the sequence and wording of the pre-written questions were subject to the natural flow of true conversation that I wanted to develop with the interviewees. The interview guide approach was noticeably efficient in my interviews with the PETs in the second phase, when they were asked about their learning experience in the PLCs through their reflections on their EFL lessons at primary schools.

Issues in interviews

When conducting the interviews with the leaders, a number of issues were taken into consideration. Firstly, some of the interviews were interrupted in some way. For the interviewees' convenience, all the interviews were conducted at their workplace during office hours. The EFL consultant, the leaders and the PETs were not completely away from their work while being interviewed; therefore, some of the interviews were sometimes interrupted by phone calls or other work duties. There was the possibility that the information that they wanted to share might be lost in some ways due to the interruptions. As an interviewer, I strategically reminded the respondents of what we had been discussing before the interruption. Furthermore, in some interviews, the noise from outdoors activities at schools could not be avoided; in these instances,

careful field-notes compensated. In addition, as noted above, I aimed at developing a true conversation with the interviewees, and therefore sometimes found it hard to cover the required themes although a list of pre-written questions was always referred to in my interviews. Last but not least, as an insider researcher sharing the same political and social culture with the interviewees (see Section 4.8), I was likely to be biased while talking about the issues relating to teaching EFL and professional development of EFL teachers in Vietnam. Being aware of this challenge, I did not discuss my views on these issues in order to invite true responses from the interviewees, and remained as neutral as possible when conducting the interviews. The challenges of being an insider researcher will be further discussed in Section 4.8 in this chapter.

As presented above, data collection was conducted in two phases and involved two sources of evidence, observation and interviews. The first phase was to obtain broad data on the PLCs' operational aspects and the participants' attitudes to the PLCs. This also helped to plan for the second phase of collecting data on how the PLCs afforded the PETs' learning process. Observation was used in combination with interviews in order to obtain valid and rich data on the PLCs' operations and the PETs' learning in the PLCs, while a number of issues were taken into account in collecting data through these two means.

4.7 Data Analysis

All the data collected for this study were qualitative, including transcripts and field notes of observations of the PLCs' activities and stakeholders' interview transcripts. Data analysis in this research started at a very early stage of the data collection procedure and followed an iterative process. The following sections describe how the collected data were coded and analysed in this study.

According to Dörnyei (2007), coding aims at 'reducing or simplifying data while highlighting special features of certain data segments in order to link them to broader topics or concepts' (p. 250). In qualitative research, coding is an inductive, iterative, simultaneous process (Dörnyei 2007; Silverman 2014) and codes of qualitative data are 'not numerical, but verbal, amounting to short

textual labels ... and are left open and flexible' (Dörnyei 2007, p. 26). As explained in Section 4.6, there were two phases of data collection for this research and the interval between the two phases was seven months. A non-linear or zigzag pattern of coding the data collected in the two phases was employed in this study. The coding process began after the first phase of data collection and started again when the second phase commenced.

4.7.1 Analysing the first phase data

The focus of the data collection in the first phase was the PLCs' operational aspects and the stakeholders' attitudes to the PLCs. This focus guided my data analysis. The first step of the analysis process was to become familiar with the collected data. I examined the observation field notes, and recordings of the PLCs' meetings and of the interviews in order to identify the key points about the PLCs' operations and the stakeholders' attitudes, which were then summarised. The recordings of the PLCs' meeting observations and interviews were then transcribed. The transcriptions were completed in Vietnamese and only the extracts presented in the thesis were translated into English.

Table 4.5: Examples of coding using tentative categories

Collected data	Categories
<i>Derived from the teachers' learning desire, I started ...</i> (EFL consultant - Interview)	PLCs' development
<i>Observing a demo lesson + engaging in a discussion</i> (Observation field notes)	Implementation of PLCs' activities
<i>Observations + discussions are the most common as the teachers like them and they are helpful.</i> (Leader - Interview)	
<i>Now, let's move on to the next part - the game 'Slap the board'</i> (Meeting B1 observation)	Participants' roles

'It was lucky that a PLC was developed... I was able to observe the other teachers' (PET- Interview)	Stakeholder's attitudes
'Mr [the consultant], could I ask you whether we should?' (Meeting D2 observation)	Relationships among participants

The second step was to deductively analyse the collected data using a list of tentative categories (Miles, Huberman & Saldana 2014). These tentative categories were developed with reference to the goal of this study and the focus of the first phase of data collection. The categories included *the PLCs' development, the implementation of PLC activities, the participant's roles in the PLCs and the stakeholders' attitudes towards the PLCs*. Data from the observations and the interviews were arranged under each of these guided categories. The smallest units of information (Guba & Lincoln 1994) – key words or phrases from the observation field notes and the transcripts of the PLCs' meetings were cut and pasted. The key words or phrases were then compared in order to identify the patterns in the PLCs' operations and the stakeholders' attitudes. One new theme emerged in the deductive analysis process; that is, 'relationships among the participants'. The outcome of the first phase of data analysis was a description of each category. An example of how the collected data were categorised in this study is shown in Table 4.5 above.

4.7.2 Analysing the second phase data

The second phase of analysing data was guided by the study's focus on the PETs' learning in the PLCs. In the second phase, the data analysis procedure went through similar steps as in the first phase, but commenced straight after observing the first meeting of each PLC. After familiarising myself with the collected data, a list of tentative categories was developed with reference to the research's focus and the reviewed literature, for deductive analysis. The categories included *learning opportunities, participants' engagement, knowledge sharing, professional identity construction, PLCs' influence on PETs' teaching, and challenges in learning in PLCs*. In the process of deductively analysing data, three

new themes emerged, namely *learners' needs, reflections, and interactions*. The coding process began with the transcripts and field notes of the PLCs' meeting observations and continued with the PETs' interviews transcripts. Descriptions of the findings under each category were recorded.

The categories relating to the PLCs' operations and stakeholders' attitudes, which had been developed and analysed in the first phase, were revisited while analysing the second phase data. More evidence was added to each category, which made richer and more valid analysis of the findings on the PLCs' operations and stakeholders' attitudes.

4.7.3 Putting it all together

The deductive analysis of the data collected in the two phases, as explained in the previous sections, was considered as pre-coding steps. This is an indispensable preparatory move in qualitative data analysis which helped me to 'meet the data meaningfully' (Dörnyei 2007, p. 250). Going through the data repeatedly, I had thoughtful reflections on and had a good sense of the data and confidently moved to a formal and structured coding process.

Referring to the preliminary findings and to the literature on teacher learning community (e.g., Cassidy et al. 2008; Hargreaves 2007; Stoll 2011) and teacher professional learning (e.g., Johnson 2009; Kelly 2006; Richards 2008), I realised that the PLCs in this study did not operate in the ways that PLCs in other contexts did and that these PLCs afforded the PETs' learning in a particular way. The research questions were then revised to focus on the PLCs' features and affordances in teacher learning (see Chapter 1). By the same token, three broader themes were developed, including *PLCs' features, PLCs' affordances for teacher learning, and participants' voices about the PLCs* to guide the data analysis at this stage. Under each broad theme, categories and subcategories were then utilised in my formal coding process. The six categories, *formal structure, learning needs, reflective inquiry, collaboration, leadership, and relationships* went under the theme of PLCs' Features; *learning opportunities in the PLCs, professional and social interactions, knowledge sharing and identity construction* under the theme of PLCs' Affordances for Teacher Learning, and

positive and negative attitudes towards the PLCs under the Participants' Voices. Similar to the pre-coding steps, the coding process occurred by putting the segments of the observation transcripts and field notes and of interview transcripts under each category of the three broad themes. The outcomes of this formal coding process were descriptions and interpretations of the findings under each of the relevant categories with reference to the relevant literature, which are presented in Chapters 5 and 6. Figure 4.2 below presents the iterative process of data analysis in this study.

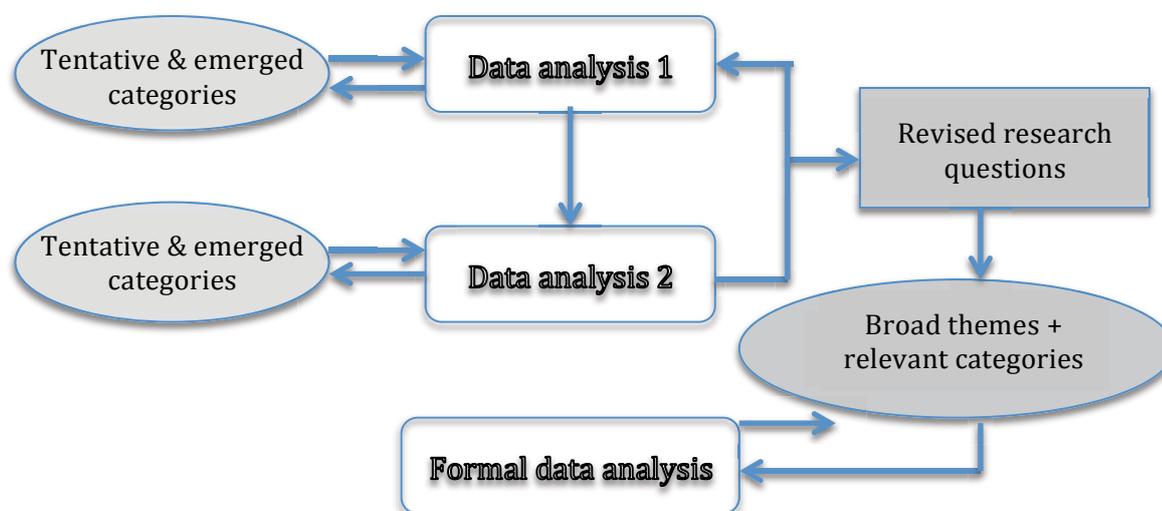


Figure 4.2: An overview of data analysis procedure

In short, data analysis in this study was an iterative process and occurred from the early stages of collecting data. A list of tentative categories was employed to deductively approach the data while allowing for other themes to emerge in the process of data analysis. In the final stage of analysing data, three broad themes were developed with their relevant categories, which guided the formal data analysis in this study.

4.8 The researcher's role

Locating myself and this study on the continuum produced by the Teaching and Learning Research Programme (TLRP 2011, cited in Atkinson & Wallace 2012, p. 49), I was neither a complete insider nor a complete outsider in the study, but in some way an insider in the research site. This study was conducted in my

home country and in a city where I have developed social and professional relationships with many of the EFL teachers, of which many were participants in this study (see Section 4.5 for an explanation of ethics in recruiting participants). I am aware of the issues in EFL teaching and learning in that context and in professional learning, and I understand the social, cultural, economic and political features of the city, which might affect the practice of EFL teaching and learning and teacher professional learning. The role of an insider researcher lent me both advantages and challenges in carrying out this study.

Firstly, as an insider in the research site, I had ease of access to the research site and participants (Atkinson & Wallace 2012). As explained in section 4.3, I was able to define the case of my study thanks to my prior relationship with the EFL consultant and a number of PETs in the city. In addition, my recruitment of the participants for this study was facilitated by the caring relationship that I had with them. According to Webster and Mertova (2007), caring relationships involve elements like collegiality, community, collaboration and value while empowering relationships involve elements such as authority and conforming to it. In that sense, the relationship I had with the participants was caring rather than empowering. It seems that the participants, including the EFL consultant, the PLCs' leaders and the PETs in the PLCs, and I had developed a sense of community of EFL teachers in that city. We had attended many professional learning activities for the EFL teachers together. Many of the PETs had been my university friends or graduated from the university where I had worked as a lecturer and teacher trainer before going overseas to do my doctoral studies. They had developed trust in me as a reliable researcher and were willing to participate in the research. For this reason, it was 'possible [for me as a researcher] ... to interact with familiar participants and sites' (Duff 2008, p. 8) without placing any sense of obligation over the participants.

Another advantage of studying familiar people was the possibility of collecting in-depth information for this study. I was at the research site 'for an extended period' (Duff 2008, p. 116) and 'typically involved in a sustained and intensive experience' with the participants (Cresswell 2014, p. 187). Spending more than six months in two phases at the research site, I was able to obtain rich and

useful data about the PLCs' features and the PETs' learning. The participants told me a 'more informed story' of their learning in the PLCs and thereby I was able to 'generate richer description' (Atkinson & Wallace 2012, p. 50). I also tried to develop and maintain that trust relationship with the other participants, who did not know much about my background. I sometimes tried to 'liberate [myself] from the professional discourse' (Holliday 2007, p. 163) and chatted with the participants about family or personal issues or other topics of shared interest. I believe the individual PETs shared their honest thoughts and stories about the PLCs and their learning.

On the other hand, a number of challenges were encountered by conducting the study in a familiar setting. The first challenge was being a non-participant observer as explained in Section 4.6.2 above. Another challenge was that my interpretations against the data had to be completed with much care and attention. In doing qualitative research, the presence and influence of the researcher seems to be unavoidable (Holliday 2007) because it is interpretive. As an insider researcher, I had 'a greater understanding of the context based on [my] prior knowledge' (Duff 2008, p. 116) of the social, cultural, economic and political features of the city. As well, I had a connection with the study through my 'past experiences with the research problems [in teacher learning] and with the participants [of my acquaintance]' (Cresswell 2014, p. 188). My interpretations against the data were filtered through these understandings, my personal background and my socioeconomic status (Cresswell 2014; Denzin & Lincoln 2005). Therefore, bias or subjectivity was likely to occur. Although 'there is no single interpretive truth' (Denzin & Lincoln 2005, p. 26) or it is 'never to be truly objective within a subjective situation' as in a study of teachers' learning and teaching (Atkinson & Wallace 2012, p. 54), I handled my interpretations carefully, continuously checking my interpretations against the data and asking other questions which emerged from the collected data. I tried to hold a 'position of 'empathic neutrality' ... to make my assumptions [as] transparent [as possible]' (Snape & Spencer 2003, p. 13). Upon interpreting the findings, I did not aim to find the *truth* or make accurate claims, but to present

reasoned arguments on the PLCs' operations and the PETs' learning process based on the relevant evidence from a variety of data sources.

Being an insider researcher both facilitated and challenged the process of conducting this study. The participants were more willing to participate because of the caring relationship. As an insider researcher, I took a reflective stance which allowed for some distance from the participants. This enabled me to 'make the familiar strange' and to obtain in-depth and genuine information. On the other hand, I tried to be neutral in interpreting the findings to ensure the trustworthiness of this study, which was also influenced by other principles including validity and reliability.

4.9 Validity and Reliability

Validity and reliability are considered as two important keys to any effective research (Cohen, Manion & Morrison 2011; Cresswell 2014; Yin 2009; Yin 2014). They were therefore two requirements for the qualitative research design that this study adopted. According to Gibbs (2007), qualitative validity indicates the accuracy of the findings that the researcher aims for by employing different strategies in collecting and interpreting qualitative data. Qualitative reliability is concerned with consistency in the findings if the research is to be carried out in a similar context by different researchers (Gibbs 2007). Upon conducting this study, I took into consideration both of these criteria, which are classified in qualitative research as credibility for internal validity, transferability for external validity and dependability for reliability (Cohen, Manion & Morrison 2011; Denzin & Lincoln 2005). I discuss how these criteria were applied in this research in the following sections.

4.9.1 Credibility

In order to attain credibility or internal validity for this study, a number of strategies were employed as suggested by educational researchers (Cresswell 2014; Lincoln & Guba 1985; Yin 2009; Yin 2012). Firstly, I spent 'prolonged time' (Cresswell 2014, p. 202) or 'prolonged engagement' (Lincoln & Guba 1985, p. 219) in the field within the particularities of the research setting and my

research timeline. As explained in Section 4.6 (data collection), being present at the research site for more than six months in the two phases enabled me to observe both pre-scheduled and rescheduled meetings of the PLCs. Within this time frame, I was able to arrange the interviews with the leaders and teachers more easily.

In addition, the validity of the findings in this study was also enhanced through a rich and thick description of the research setting and clarification of researcher's bias brought to the study (Cresswell 2014). Chapter 2 in this study provided a detailed account of English language teaching and learning, teacher professional development in Vietnam and general information on the PLCs in Thanh Van. The research setting, primary schools in the city, was also clearly described early in this chapter (Section 4.4). The detailed description of the research setting helped to 'transport the readers to the setting' and the results thereby 'become more realistic and richer' (Cresswell 2014, p. 202). In addition, the role of an insider researcher was also clarified in the process of collecting and interpreting data in order to minimise the researcher's bias (see Section 4.8).

Simply put, the validity of the findings in this study was obtained through a variety of strategies including prolonged engagement, detailed description of the setting and clarification of the researcher's bias.

4.9.2 Transferability

In qualitative research, external validity is referred to as transferability or generalisability. It has been argued that transferability or generalisability is problematic in qualitative research (Cohen, Manion & Morrison 2011; Cresswell 2014; Gibbs 2007; Lincoln & Guba 1985). However, these authors suggested that it is not the researcher's task to decide whether the findings of his or her study are transferable to 'individuals, sites or places outside of those under study ... [but to provide] a particular description and themes developed in a context of a specific site' (Cresswell 2014, pp. 203-4). Hence, particularity, not transferability is 'the hallmark of good qualitative research' (Cresswell 2014, p. 204). Transferability should be decided by the readers and by the other

researchers; therefore, thick description of data is required (Lincoln & Guba 1985).

As stated in sections 4.3 and 4.4 above, this study was conducted to investigate the PLCs' operations as learning sites for the PETs across Thanh Van. Therefore, the particularities of the PLCs in that specific city for a specific group of teachers were uncovered and reported in detail in this thesis. I did not intend to generalise the findings of this study, but my rich and thick description and interpretation of the data (Chapters 5, 6 and 7) allows for the readers' decision on whether the findings are transferable to other contexts or not.

4.9.3 Dependability

Reliability is related to the accuracy or the consistency of the findings. It indicates that if the study was carried out on a similar group of participants, in a similar context, similar results would be found. However, it has been argued that the notion of reliability is largely positivist (Lincoln & Guba 1985) or 'simply unworkable' (LeCompte & Preissle 1993, cited in Cohen, Manion & Morrison 2011, p. 201) because of the uniqueness of the natural settings in qualitative research. The term 'dependability' is therefore preferred in place of the notion of reliability in qualitative research (Lincoln & Guba 1985).

According to Lincoln & Guba (1985), dependability is concerned with 'member checking, peer debriefing, triangulation, prolonged engagement in the field, reflexive journals, negative case analysis and independent audits' (pp. 108-9). In literature on qualitative research, other means were also suggested in addressing dependability or reliability; for instance, making sure of no obvious mistakes in the transcripts or no changes in the meaning of the codes during the coding process (Gibbs 2007) or recording a detailed procedure of conducting documenting a case study or setting up a detailed case study protocol (Yin 2009; Yin 2014).

In this study, different strategies were employed to enhance the dependability of the findings. A research protocol (Yin 2009; Yin 2014) was made to keep track of what had been completed and would be completed. I also kept a research journal recording all the steps taken in conducting this study,

particularly the procedure of collecting and analysing data. My research journal enabled me to be well-organised throughout the process; in the very first steps in recruiting the participants and in the iterative process of analysing the data, to be reflective on previous steps and to revise the steps which followed collecting and interpreting data. In addition, the accuracy of the data was assured by checking the transcripts very carefully. Before transcribing the PLCs' observations and interviews, I went through each of the audio recordings at least once to get a general idea of what happened. I then transcribed in Vietnamese and replayed them to check whether any obvious mistakes were made during transcription (Gibbs 2007). I sent the informants the transcripts of their interviews and my written summaries of the PLCs' meetings to check (Lincoln & Guba 1985) and they all agreed. Furthermore, the meaning of each category was kept unchanged in the coding process (Gibbs 2007) although this study experienced a zigzag pattern of data analysis. The tentative categories were developed in the pre-coding process and revised for the formal coding process. In order to ensure the accuracy of the findings, I clearly defined each of the categories in my research journal and I repeatedly compared the raw data with the codes that were completed in the coding process.

The matter of translation also contributed to the dependability of the findings in this study. All the data were collected in Vietnamese. The recordings of the observations and interviews were also transcribed in Vietnamese. In the coding process, Vietnamese words and phrases of the data were used under the English categories because as a researcher, I am fluent in both languages. Only the quotes cited in the thesis were then translated into English. The reason for using only English quotes was to avoid the excessive length of the thesis. English quotes went along with the Vietnamese quotes until the final draft of this thesis was revised. In order to ensure the precision of the findings through translation, the final draft of the findings chapters with both Vietnamese and English quotes was reviewed by one peer, who is fluent in both Vietnamese and English and is interested in teaching English as a foreign language.

In general, this qualitative case study took into consideration different strategies to address internal validity and dependability or reliability of the

findings within the practical and possible conditions of the research setting. Transferability or external validity of this study is open to the readers' decision by considering the particularities of the specific site where this research was set up.

4.10 Summary of the chapter

This chapter discussed research methodology, which was designed specifically for the study reported in this thesis. The first section presents a rationale as to why a qualitative case study was adopted for this study. Given that the research aimed to investigate the particularities of the PLCs' operations as learning sites for the PETs in Thanh Van, a qualitative case study was an appropriate choice. It allowed me to explore and interpret the PLCs' operations and the PETs' learning in depth and within its natural setting (Cohen, Manion & Morrison 2011; Yin 2014). In addition, this chapter has presented a detailed account of the research site, participants, data collection and the data analysis procedures that the present study followed. My role as an insider researcher and the criteria of credibility, transferability and dependability to ensure the trustworthiness of the findings were also discussed in this chapter. The findings of the study will be reported in the next two chapters, Chapters 5 and 6.

CHAPTER 5: The Features of Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) in the Vietnamese Context

5.1 Introduction

Professional learning communities (PLCs) are defined differently by educational researchers (see Chapter 3). It has been argued that there is no universal definition of a PLC because ‘in community as in clothing, one size does not fit all’ (Grossman, Wineburg & Woolworth 2001, pp. 961-2). Therefore, any PLC accommodates particular features that emanate from the context where the community develops. As shown in the literature review undertaken for this thesis (see Chapter 3), there is a large range of features or factors presented in effective PLCs or similar collaborative professional learning activities (Cassidy et al. 2008; DuFour 2004; Hargreaves 2007; Katz & Earl 2010; Stoll 2011). Cassidy et al. (2008) have proposed a range of factors necessary for building communities of enquiry, including dialogue and participation, relationships, perspectives, structure and context, climate, purpose and control. Similarly, the PLCs described by Stoll (2011) feature the need to have a shared learning focus, cultivate the participants’ involvement and distributed leadership, nurture respectful and trusting relationships among the participants, enhance collaborative inquiry, examine the process of implementation and its outcomes, ensure supportive structures, and develop external networking (see Chapter 3 for more examples of PLCs’ features). These characteristics of PLCs and other similar professional learning activities have been proposed based on the studies conducted in different contexts of teacher learning. While being informed by these proposed features, the current study did not aim to find out which list of features best reflected the PLCs developed as learning sites for the primary school English language teachers (PETs) across Thanh Van. Instead, I aimed to explore the features of the professional learning communities in the particular context of my study.

The focus of this chapter is on the outcomes of the data collected for the present study to answer the first research question: ‘*What are the features of the professional learning communities in Thanh Van?*’ Through my analysis of the collected data presented in the previous chapter, I was able to identify six

significant features incorporated in the PLCs in the specific context of Thanh Van . These features are that the PLCs are derived from learners' needs, embedded within a formal structure, have layers of leadership, cultivate reflective inquiry, work towards a culture of collaboration, and contain complex relationships. While this chapter will focus more on the operational aspects of the PLCs, Chapter 6 will provide more detail about the PETs' learning opportunities in the PLCs.

5.2 Derived from learners' needs

The professional learning communities (PLCs) developed as learning sites to meet the learning needs of primary school English language teachers (PETs) in Thanh Van .

The findings from the interviews with the stakeholders indicate that the PLCs were developed to meet the learning needs of PETs. As explained in Chapter 2, the PLCs in Thanh Van were set up in 2008 by the Department of Education and Training (DOET), specifically by the EFL consultant. In my interview, the EFL consultant shared that the PETs in the city often confided in him that they did not have anyone to learn with at school and had to join in professional learning activities with the teachers of other subjects. The consultant continued:

'Derived from the teachers' ideas and desire, I started ... such an idea. I must establish professional communities so that all the teachers have at least an opportunity to exchange their experience with the other teachers from the schools nearby.'

(Interview, 28/01/2013)

A similar account of the PETs' desire for learning collaboratively with their colleagues was confirmed by the PLCs' leaders and the PETs themselves. For them, the PLCs seemed to be the only site where the PETs were able to learn from each other from their training background of secondary school EFL teachers (see Chapter 2). They looked forward to the PLCs' activities every semester. The teachers' voices on the benefits of PLCs will be further analysed in Chapter 6.

From the stakeholders' views on the importance of PLCs, it can be concluded that the PLCs helped to 'reduce teachers' professional isolation' that the PETs had

experienced at their school (McLaughlin 1997, cited in Aubusson, Ewing & Hoban 2009, p. 7). Not being school-based, unlike those described in a majority of the literature about professional learning communities (Aubusson, Ewing & Hoban 2009; DuFour 2004; Grossman, Wineburg & Woolworth 2001; Little 2012; Stoll et al. 2006), each of the PLCs in this study gathered the 'isolated' PETs from seven or eight primary schools of various academic, economic and sociocultural conditions who had different professional backgrounds and teaching and learning experience. It was not simply a gathering of the teachers, but a venue for the teachers to meet and learn to teach from each other, which is a key rationale for a teacher community (Grossman, Wineburg & Woolworth 2001). The PETs from different primary schools in Thanh Van brought to the community their diversity in teaching practice in terms of learning and teaching conditions, class size, students' background and language proficiency. It was their diversity that mutually engaged the teachers in their learning process within a learning community (Wenger 1998). Furthermore, analysis of the observational and interview data shows that the four PLCs' activities had a clear and persistent focus on promoting the PETs' learning process. Firstly, the types of the four PLCs' activities were decided by the teacher participants themselves. In the two academic years 2012-2013 and 2013-2014, when the data for this study were collected, the PLCs' most common activities (see Appendix A) were observing an English language demonstration lesson delivered to the students at different primary schools, and then reflecting on the strengths and shortcomings of the lesson and discussing other issues relating to their English language learning and teaching at primary schools. Demonstrating a certain teaching technique through microteaching was sometimes conducted in the PLCs. In meeting A3, one out of the ten observed meetings, the PETs demonstrated and exchanged their experience in using language games. The leaders of the PLCs- A, B and C explained that observing and reflecting had been the PETs' most preferred activities because they found these activities helpful to their professional growth. Secondly, it was found in this study that the topics of the PLCs' activities, specifically the demonstrations, were related to the PETs' learning needs. The topics varied across the meetings and the PLCs (see Appendix A). They included teaching phonics (D2), songs (C1), stories, or reading for comprehension (A1, B2,

C2), using new materials (A2, C3) or a new structure (B1 and D1) and designing and using language games with and without computers (A3). The underlying reasons for choosing the topics were uncovered through my interviews with the leaders and by listening to what was shared in the meetings. These topics were usually decided by the whole community in the pre-meetings (A2, A3, C2 and D1, D2), or sometimes by the leaders (A1, B2, C2) and by the demonstration teachers (B1, C3). The leaders of these PLCs explained that the topics selected were usually what the PETs found the most challenging and wished to learn.

The findings reveal that the way that the PLCs' topics were decided by the PETs themselves, or by the leaders, distinguished the PLCs from the one-off workshops and one-day in-service training courses that Vietnamese EFL teachers, including the PETs in this city, usually attend. In the workshops or in-service teacher training courses, the activities' topics are usually predetermined by the experts or the teacher trainers, who are considered outsiders to the teachers' learning process and may not be aware of the teachers' real learning needs. In this study, the PLCs' leaders, who were also PETs, and teacher participants, were the insiders of their learning process and took responsibility 'for making decisions about the content or focus of their learning' (Aubusson, Ewing & Hoban 2009, p. 11). Therefore, their learning needs were possibly more authentically met.

As discussed above, the PLCs were established as learning sites to cater for the learning needs of the PETs. In most of the cases, the PETs themselves decided the format and topics of the learning activities that they found helpful to their professional growth.

5.3 Embedded within a formal structure

Analysing the data on the implementation of PLCs' activities, I learned that the way the PLCs were conceived of and implemented reveals that the PLCs were firmly embedded within the formal structure of Vietnamese society. Most of the teachers' professional learning activities in the city were required to follow the hierarchical mechanism of the DOET and primary schools.

The formal structure embedded in the PLCs lies in the way their members were assigned by the DOET. As described in Chapter 2, the PETs in Thanh Van were

grouped into six professional learning communities by the DOET, specifically the EFL consultant. The PLCs' members were regrouped every one or two years in order to mingle the teachers. The EFL consultant explained that the location of primary schools and the qualifications of the PETs were taken into consideration in allocating the PLCs' members. His aim was to make it easier for the PETs from nearby schools to get together and to bring the PETs' diversity in qualifications and teachings skills to the PLCs. As well, the PLCs' leaders were appointed by the DOET. The leaders worked as liaisons between the DOET and the PLCs in scheduling and implementing their activities. The leaders were expected to inform and report all their PLCs' activities in advance to the DOET for their approval (see Section 5.4).

In addition, the findings of this study suggest that the PLCs were developed as an official professional learning activity for the PETs across the city. Although the PETs have a shared domain of interests (Wenger 1998) in learning to teach English language to their primary school students, their learning communities were not developed 'in a voluntary or invitational process' (Hargreaves 2007, p. 183) as a result of their wanting to improve their students' English language learning. Instead, the PLCs were initiated and officially set up by the DOET or the EFL consultant. Without the initiative of the EFL consultant, the PLCs might not have been established.

As an official professional activity, attending the PLCs' activities is compulsory for the PETs. Explaining why attending the PLCs was established as a compulsory professional learning activity for the PETs in the city, the EFL consultant stated:

'Frankly speaking, considering their situation, the teachers participating in the PLCs actually ... a duty ... those who are willing, in fact, they don't really like it. If obligatory, they have to; but the number of the teachers who are voluntary and eager to attend probably is not many... They have to teach at school, do extra teaching, here and there. So their devotion to their teaching at school is still limited; they don't devote all their best. They do only if asked.'

(Interview, 28/01/2013)

The EFL consultant's sharing indicates that in supervising the English language learning and teaching activities at the primary schools of Thanh Van, he well understood the constraints that the PETs may have had in their teaching and professional learning. Although most of the teachers had a strong desire and real need to learn to teach EFL to primary school students, for which they were not trained, the PETs themselves might be reluctant to attend the PLCs' meetings if they were not obliged to. It is likely that their heavy workload at school and other commitments might have hindered them from devoting their time to professional learning, specifically attending the PLCs' activities. On average, a PET had to teach at least eighteen 40-minute periods per week plus other pastoral and administrative activities at school. Outside of school, most of the PETs took up extra English teaching at language centres to increase their income. However, the observational data show that the PETs regularly attended the PLCs' activities (see Appendix A). Further reasons for their regular attendance at the PLCs' activities will be discussed in Chapter 6, presenting the findings of the participants' attitudes towards the PLCs.

Additionally, the implementation of the PLCs' activities required formal approval from the DOET and the primary schools. Interviewing the EFL consultant, the PLCs' leaders and the PETs, I understood how the implementation of the PLCs' activities had been formally facilitated by the DOET, notably the EFL consultant. When being informed of and approving the plan of one PLC, the EFL consultant sent an official invitation on behalf of the DOET to the relevant primary schools to seek the school leaders' approval. Leader Xuan of the PLC-A explained: *'A letter from Department is important. I remember in the previous years, the Department didn't issue the invitation letter. As a leader of my community, I informed the principals of the relevant schools of the PLC's scheduled activities and invited teachers to participate. Many of the school principals weren't pleased and didn't allow their teachers to attend. They requested an official invitation from the Department. Then, now it [approval letter] comes.'* (Interview, 05/02/2013). With the official approval from the DOET and the primary schools, the PETs were allowed to leave their schools, or to reschedule their school's duties, in order to participate in the PLCs' activities. In a hierarchical society like Vietnam (Hofstede, Hofstede & Minkov 2010), it is

understandable to require such a formal approval from the top management of the DOET and primary schools for their teachers' professional learning activities. From the data, it is concluded that the official support was an important factor for the success of the PLCs (Aubusson, Ewing & Hoban 2009, p. 40) or 'an important resource for PLCs' (Stoll et al. 2006, p. 235). Regarding the schedule of the PLCs' meetings (see Appendix A), because the activities were carried out inside primary schools during school hours, I believe that the official approval from the DOET and primary schools was requisite to ensure the safety of the students and the teachers' responsibilities in teaching and learning. To reiterate, the implementation of the PLCs' activities involved the support of the authorities at different levels, namely the DOET and the primary schools.

5.4 Layers of leadership: Informal and formal

Leadership is shown to be one of the factors that significantly affects how PLCs are implemented and sustained as effective professional learning sites (Katz & Earl 2010; Stoll 2011). As discussed in Chapter 3, leadership in PLCs needs to be understood beyond the model of a single or a small number of 'heroic leader[s] standing atop a hierarchy' (Camburn, Rowan & Taylor 2003, p. 348) or 'formal leaders' (Katz & Earl 2010, p. 48) managing the participants' engagement, and is instead, distributed across the members to promote their learning (Stoll 2011). The former is known as formal leadership and the latter is informal or distributed leadership (Katz & Earl 2010). The findings show that the PLCs for PETs in Thanh Van incorporated different layers of leadership, that is the informal leadership distributed among the teachers and the formal leadership of the EFL consultant and the PLCs' leaders.

As clearly explained in the Literature Review (Chapter 3), leadership is associated with notions of authority and power and influence. The ways that leadership is exercised depend on who leads and who follows and in what specific social and cultural context. It is also argued that an unequal power relationship is inherent in any teaching and learning situation. The interrelationship of leadership, power and power relationships is therefore complex. For the sake of clarity in analysing and reporting the findings in the thesis, this section focuses on the ways that leadership

was exhibited through the roles that the participants took on in implementing the PLCs' activities and facilitating PETs' learning process. The power relationships among the participants will be discussed in depth in Section 5.7 in this chapter.

5.4.1 Teachers leadership

As discussed in Section 5.3 above, the PLCs were developed and implemented by the Department as an official and compulsory professional learning activity for the PETs across the city. However, the PETs in each PLC were expected to play an active role in leading their learning process. Based on the guidelines suggested by the EFL consultant at the beginning of every academic year, the PETs started planning their PLC's activities in relation to their needs and time availability. As presented in Section 5.2, the PETs were usually involved in deciding on the most helpful types and topics of activities. By doing so, the PETs were leading their learning process, making an appropriate 'choice of the issue or problem' (Marquardt 1999, cited in Aubusson, Ewing & Hoban 2009, p. 40) that they were facing in their teaching practice. This form of teacher involvement is referred to as informal or distributed leadership (Katz & Earl 2010). Literature shows that distributed leadership is often nurtured in developing PLCs (Harris 2011; Stoll 2011) and is strongly linked to changes in teaching and learning practice (Katz & Earl 2010; Timperley & Parr 2009; Timperley 2005). However, the evidence in this study shows that the distribution of leadership did not regularly happen in the teacher learning communities, which is pertinent to what was found in communities in Wales (Harris 2011) and networking of schools in England (Katz & Earl 2010). It was found in this study that the PLCs' leaders sometimes took over the PETs' leadership in scheduling the PLCs' activities (meetings A1, B2, C2). This reflected another layer of leadership in the PLCs - formal leadership from the top management board; the following sections explore this issue.

5.4.2 The EFL consultant's leadership

Analysis of the interview and observational data suggests that the EFL consultant exercised his formal leadership as a leader from the Department in his roles of supervising, facilitating and moderating the implementation process of the PLCs'

activities. As discussed earlier in this chapter, the PLCs were embedded within the formal structure of the DOET and primary schools and the EFL consultant functioned as a 'heroic leader' (Camburn, Rowan & Taylor 2003, p. 348) from the top management of the DOET to supervise and facilitate the PLCs' activities. Without his leadership, the PLCs' activities would not be implemented in primary schools and the PETs would not be allowed to leave their school duties to attend the PLCs' meetings.

Added to that, the EFL consultant sometimes played the role of a moderator in the PLCs' meetings with his presence. In most of the discussions, the PLCs' leaders usually used different ways to encourage the teachers to contribute their ideas. When the PETs seemed to be reluctant to participate, the EFL consultant stimulated their active participation by insisting:

'Actually, this is a very rare opportunity for us [the PETs] to learn from each other. Moreover, this year we started using the materials Family and Friends, a new textbook... I think you feel free to discuss. This is a very rare opportunity, so you should feel free to discuss, we can find out some solutions and strategies or experiences so that we can teach better. I hope that you share your challenges and concerns. Feel free to share, don't worry ...'

(Meeting A1, 24/01/2013)

The EFL consultant's encouragement was more to facilitate the PETs' engagement than to be authoritative in coercing the teachers to participate. As a leader at the departmental level, the consultant highlighted the value of 'professional dialogue' and advised what and how to share in the discussion sections in bringing the teachers 'to reflect on and challenge their existing practice' (Stoll 2011, p. 110). Thereby, the PETs were probably more aware of the significance of learning from each other in the PLCs and became more engaged in the discussion section, which will be further analysed in Chapter 6.

5.4.3 Leadership of PLCs' leaders

From the analysis of the observational and interview data, it is apparent that another layer of formal leadership of the PLCs lies in the roles that the PLCs' leaders played in facilitating the PLCs' activities.

The first role that the PLCs' leaders played was an organiser, which was explored upon analysing the observational and interview data. As organisers, the leaders usually had the PETs discuss and decide on the topics and time of each meeting. However, the leaders sometimes took control in deciding the schedule of the PLCs' activities by themselves (meetings A1, B2, C2). Furthermore, as an organiser, the leaders ensured that the PETs from different schools took turns to deliver the demonstration lessons. This enabled the PETs to learn by observing EFL lessons taught in various teaching and learning conditions. After the schedule was planned, the leaders informed the DOET for their approval (see Sections 5.2 and 5.3 above).

However, the findings show that the schedule of the PLCs' meetings was not always put into practice due to the unavailability of the leaders.

Table 5.1: Plans and implementation of PLCs' meetings

	No of meetings in 2012-2013		No of meetings in 2013-2014		No of meetings observed
	<i>planned</i>	<i>held</i>	<i>planned</i>	<i>held</i>	
PLC-A	03	03	02	02	03
PLC-B	02	01	02	01	02
PLC-C	02	02	03	03	03
PLC-D	02	02	03	03	02

As can be seen in Table 5.1, the meetings of the PLCs A, C and D were held as planned over the last two years while the PLC-B's ones were not always. From my observations of the PLCs' activities, the leaders were present in all the meetings. This accounts for why the PLC-B's meetings were sometimes cancelled. In analysing the data obtained in my interview with the PLC-B's leader – Ms Quyen and the teachers in the PLC-B, it was found that the planned meetings were not always able to be rescheduled as both the leader and the PETs could not allocate a period of time when most of them were available, although the PETs looked

forward to the meetings. Ms Quyen was occupied with her professional commitments including teaching EFL at primary schools and attending national workshops and training programs in relation to the National Foreign Language Project 2020. This indicates that the position of the PLC-B's leader was vital in both scheduling and carrying out the activities and the teachers seemed to be passive in making their learning opportunities happen. In other words, the more powerful position of a PLC's leader sometimes undermined the informal leadership of the PETs in scheduling professional learning activities, even though the teachers had a pressing need to learn to teach EFL. Nevertheless, the tension between the formal power of the PLC's leaders and the informal leadership of the PETs was not palpable. The PETs were also able to exercise their power in scheduling their learning (see Section 5.4.1).

Secondly, the observational data show that standing in a more powerful position of being an officially appointed leader of a PLC, all the four PLCs' leaders exercised their leadership in moderating the discussion sections with different strategies. At the beginning of the discussion sections, the PLCs' leaders usually highlighted the benefits of engaging in the discussion sections.

In meeting C1, the PLC's leader stated:

'Now, generally we should start discussing professional matters. First of all, I hope that you [the teachers], with the lesson of an English song, you could contribute your honest feedback so that we [the community] can agree on a common form, on which the teachers in our community can rely and teach the English song more easily.'

(Meeting C1, 17/1/2013)

In the other meetings of the PLC-C and the other PLCs, the leaders spoke similar words at the beginning of the discussion section in order to stimulate the PETs' participation. It is clear from the data that they insisted on the significance of 'open and frank exchange of ideas' in a teacher learning team and 'collective responsibility' towards the individual teachers' growth (Aubusson, Ewing & Hoban 2009, p. 59). Being strategically encouraged to actively participate in the PLCs'

activities and to collaboratively solve their teaching issues, the PETs in each PLC might be more aware of the significance of collaboration within their PLC.

As seen from the observational data, another strategy that the PLCs' leaders employed to promote the PETs' active participation in the discussion was to nominate some PETs to share their ideas first. The nominated PETs were usually the demonstration teachers or the PETs having experience in teaching the topic of the demonstration lessons. As an insider researcher (see Chapter 4), I understand that the PETs did not necessarily follow what the leaders asked them to. However, analysis of the observational data suggests that all the nominated PETs either pointed out one strength or shortcoming of the lesson or shared their concerns to the community. The nomination strategy helped to 'break the ice' in the discussion when the PETs were reluctant to contribute their ideas for certain reasons, either being shy, or afraid of judging the others. During the length of the discussion sections, the leaders engaged the PETs in the discussion by suggesting that they give their feedback chronologically, referring to the procedure of the lessons, from the first activity to the last one. It seemed that the PETs were more involved in the discussions when focusing on each part of the demonstration. From the observations of the meetings, it was clear that the PETs in most of the meetings (A1, A2, B1, C1, C2, C3, D1, D2) tended to be quiet at the beginning of the discussions, but raised more questions and ideas to be solved by the community towards the end. The finding suggests that this tendency have resulted from the leaders' strategic moderation. The PETs' involvement will be further analysed in the next section – cultivating reflective inquiry.

In general, the findings of this study show that the PLCs incorporated two layers of leadership, namely informal and formal leadership (Katz & Earl 2010). The PLCs aimed to distribute leadership across the participants by involving the teacher participants in deciding their learning activities, a feature which has proved to be effective in teachers' professional learning process (Timperley & Parr 2009; Timperley 2005). However, the formal leadership of the 'heroic leaders' (Camburn, Rowan & Taylor 2003, p. 348), namely the EFL consultant and the PLCs' leaders, sometimes played a prominent role in developing and implementing each PLC's activities. It helped to 'create a learning culture' (Stoll et al. 2006, p. 235) in the

PLCs by ‘ensuring supportive structures’ (Stoll 2011, p. 111) including time and space for teachers’ reflection and strategically, it promoted reflective and collaborative inquiry among the PETs, who tended to be reluctant in sharing publicly. To reiterate, both informal and formal leaderships were incorporated in the PLCs although the impact of formal leadership or top management of the leaders seemed to weigh more in development and implementation of the PLCs’ activities.

5.5 Cultivating reflective inquiry

Reflective practice has been considered a central pillar in teacher education for some time (Freeman 2002) and has proved to be an effective professional learning activity (Chien 2013; Farrell 2008). Stoll et al. (2006) have suggested that reflective professional inquiry is a characteristic of professional learning communities and can be performed in different forms. In this section, I briefly present how the PLCs cultivated reflective inquiry among the teachers; this feature will be further analysed in Chapter 6, which focuses on the PETs’ learning in the PLCs.

Data clearly show that in the PLCs, the PETs were provided with opportunities to reflect on their teaching experiences. As presented in Section 5.2, the PLCs’ most common activities were observing a demonstration lesson and discussing its strengths and shortcomings, and other issues relating to teaching practice (see Appendix A). The findings from observations and interviews reveal that these types of learning activities enabled both the demonstration teachers and observer teachers to reflect on their teaching. Their reflections were shared in the community but also quietly in the PETs’ minds, which was explored through the interviews with the seven PETs.

In most of the meetings, the demonstration teachers were encouraged to share with the community the objectives of their lessons and any of the concerns and issues in preparing and delivering the lessons. Their reflective sharing is illustrated in the following extract from meeting C3.

Teacher Hang in meeting C3, after explaining her objectives said:

'...I think I went a bit quickly compared with the allotted time; that means I failed to manage my time properly. When students were working, some students made mistakes, I tried to correct them directly, but perhaps not enough.... I expect that you [other teachers] could give me some more advice.'

(Meeting C3, 12/12/2013).

Likewise, demonstration teacher Lan in meeting A2 shared with the community: *'I may delay students' practice of the structure 'Where is the ... [library]?' to the next lesson and save more time on my students' learning new vocabulary of the places at school.'* (Meeting A2 - 07/11/2013). In the other meetings, the demonstration teachers also made similar reflections. Their reflections happened before or while the observer teachers gave feedback on their lessons. It is apparent from the data that reflecting on their teaching, the demonstration teachers were provided with opportunities to critically analyse the successful and unsuccessful parts of their teachings.

As seen from the observational and interview data, the possibilities of making reflections were more available to the observer teachers. The observer teachers engaged in their learning by sharing their reflections publicly in the PLCs and with their own silent reflections. Sitting at the back of the classroom to observe a demonstration lesson, the observer teachers were 'seeing' the teachers from the perspective of a teacher and an observer (Kumaravadivelu 2012). They may have taught an English lesson on a similar topic or used a similar textbook or encountered similar teaching problems in managing their lessons. Upon observing and engaging in the discussion sections, they possibly recalled what they had done before. Below is a good example to illustrate how the demonstrations and the participants' feedback stimulated the PETs' reflective inquiry.

Teaching the same lesson as the demonstration teacher Hang in meeting C3, teacher Hoa, an experienced PET in the PLC-C, shared her own experience in conducting a language game, called *Pass the ball*. Her sharing followed another teacher's (teacher Anh) feedback on the game. In a clear and confident voice, teacher Hoa stated:

'... About passing the ball... Ms Anh suggested the students passing the stick, but I think it is more exciting to pass a ball, the class will be more excited. But the ball the teacher Hang used is small, hard to catch. If I was her, I would use a rubber ball; it's easier for the students to catch, a rubber ball is stickier; the ball should be bigger, easier to catch; don't use a plastic one, it's likely to drop, a rubber ball is not. Passing the stick is slower ... If the ball is bigger, passing around, the class will be more delighted, that's the final activity. Also, I think music is rather ...; use rock music ... louder, louder; being excited, let it happen, that's funnier...'

(Meeting C3, 12/12/2013)

This sharing indicates that meeting C3 offered teacher Hoa a valuable opportunity to see herself as a teacher in the demonstration lesson, to listen to the others' ideas, to reflect on her previous teachings and to share with the community. In other words, the PLCs created stimulus for her critical reflections on how a language game could maximise its benefits of arousing their primary school students' interest in learning EFL. This reflection occurred not only to teacher Hoa, but to the other PETs as well. In a similar vein, many PETs in the PLC-C and other PLCs reflected on their previous teachings upon observing the demonstrations, but their reflections were kept as their own learning sources (see Chapter 6). Reflective inquiry was therefore promoted in the PLC-C and the PLCs, which will be further presented and analysed in Chapter 6.

To sum up, in the PLCs, both the demonstration teachers and observer teachers were able to do 'reflection-on-action' (Schön 1987) in order to examine the underlying reasons for their action or behaviours. The teachers in the PLCs thereby learned to become 'reflective practitioners' (Schön 1983) (further findings in Chapter 6). They actively thought about and judged the others' and their own teaching and became 'active and thinking decision-makers' of their teaching behaviours (Borg 2015, p. 1). This was not an individual endeavour, but a collaborative one, which will be presented in the following section.

5.6 Towards a culture of collaboration

Collaboration is considered to be one of the factors of a successful professional learning community (Cassidy et al. 2008; Hargreaves 2007; Katz & Earl 2010; Stoll 2011). This section briefly presents the findings on how the PLCs promoted a culture of collaboration among the teacher learners to stimulate their professional learning. This feature of PLCs will be further analysed in Chapter 6, where the findings on how the teachers learned through social interactions are presented.

Analysis of the data shows that the nature of collaboration in the PLCs was well reflected in the types of learning activities that the PLCs conducted. As presented in Section 5.2 above, the PETs' most preferable learning activities were delivering and observing demonstrations, and critically analysing the strengths and shortcomings of the lessons and the other issues that they had in their teaching. These activities brought the teachers together to learn from each other. It was found from the data that the demonstration teachers often sought ideas and support from their colleagues at their school in designing the lessons and teaching aids. The downside of over-preparation for the demonstrations was that the observer teachers might not have the opportunity to learn from a real picture of an English language lesson at primary school (see Chapter 6 for further analysis). However, the benefit of that preparation was to enable the teachers to work collaboratively to design a lesson plan and learn together, which is similar to what has been found in the activity called 'lesson study cycle' (Tasker 2011, p. 205).

The culture of collaborative inquiry was evident in the way that the teachers participated in the discussion sections. The PETs critically analysed the strengths and shortcomings of the demonstrations.

In the discussion section of meeting C2, teacher Lai raised one shortcoming in the demonstration and the other teachers engaged in that dialogue.

Teacher Lai (T. Lai): I have an opinion ... I found that in the activity Reading the text silently, the teacher didn't allocate time for her students' reading and explain the reason for their reading. I think the teacher did not instruct clearly. Only after students finished, the teacher asked: 'Are you ready?' and then got students' answers.

T. Hoa: *Reading and doing exercise in the textbook.*

Demonstration teacher Cuc: *I did ask the students to read and do the exercise in the textbook.*

T. Lai: *read and do the exercise in the textbook, but what do they need to do specifically?*

T. Cuc: *Read and tick.*

T. Lai: *It's not clear ... Read and tick ... but what to tick? You should explain ... give a clearer instruction.*

T.Ha: *The teacher sticked some pictures on the board.*

T. Lai: *Yes, the teacher did stick some pictures on the board. But, doing exercise ... what exercise do they need to do? For example, the teacher may say: 'Put a tick or a cross' and should ...*

T.Ha and others: *Yes, the teacher forgot to tell, only sticked the pictures.*

(Meeting C2 - 13/11/2013)

A similar mode of engagement among the PLC's members was illustrated by the following extract from Meeting A2:

Leader Xuan: *About the part of presenting the new structure, what do you think?*

Teacher Ai (T. Ai): *closed pairs are needed. Students need to practice in pairs, with teachers and then with peers.*

Leader Xuan: *No, that's the practice section after presenting the new structure.*

T. Hoa: *Yes, that's the practice stage. We need to talk about how to elicit sentences.*

Leader Xuan: *Students have learned the structure 'Is it +?' ... completed with the name of someone?*

T. Ai and T. Hoa: *Yes. Now, replacing names with places.*

T. Hoa: *As I mentioned earlier, I meant ... focusing on how to elicit the new structure, Explanation, ... the [demonstration] teacher explained its usage*

and meaning. After each time explaining, the teacher asked her students to make sentences, I found it a bit messy.

T. Loan: No, I find it ok. The teacher showed the pictures and then elicited questions.

T. Hoa: Eliciting questions was ok, but the problem lies in the teacher's explanation.

T. Vi: When explaining, the only thing that the teacher needs to do is demonstrating, miming, [demo by moving her hand up]... students will definitely know that they need to raise their tone. Don't ask: 'Do you need to raise their tone ?' Just do like that [miming], not explaining.

Leader Xuan [in a determined voice]: Here, missing one important part, that is 'run through', completely running through... run through questions, then run through answers. In general, we need to follow such an order, then...

T. Vi: Do you mean that students need to repeat making questions in an order?

Leader Xuan: Yes, students didn't have enough practice.

T. Hoa: Right, I think that students should be provided with word cues to practise making questions and then answers. [other teachers nodded their heads to show their agreement].

Being mediated by leader Xuan, different PETs in meeting A2 raised their voice on the demonstration teacher's performance and suggested different ways of presenting a new structure effectively, using pictures to elicit questions and modeling the rising tone of a Yes-No question. At the same time, the leader gave feedback on the lesson by highlighting the step of running through in presenting a new structure - asking students to make questions or answers from each of the pictures before practising it in pairs.

In addition, the PETs turned to the community, their PLC's leader or the consultant for the solution to their issues or concerns in teaching. The following extract shows how teacher Dung, one novice teacher in PLC-D, turned to the community for their interpretation of the teaching actions that she was concerned about.

Teacher Dung (T. Dung): *I have just started my teaching job for nearly one year, but in the demonstration, I find some parts different from what I learned at university...In conducting activitiesI'd like to ask whether we should check the students' understanding about [instructions]... of each activity?*

Other teachers (chorally): *Do you mean conducting games?*

T. Dung: *Like games or other activities for example, the activity of Sound and Letter Linking, after the teacher gave the instruction, should she check...?*

Other teachers: *We should check? Check? Uh huh, that's...*

Demonstration teacher Phuong: *In my teaching, I did check...*

Other teachers: *Yes, she did. We should.*

(Meeting D2 – 29/11/2013)

Teacher Dung compared what she saw in the demonstration with what she learned in her pre-service teacher training program at university. In her interview, teacher Dung said that her exchange as showed in the above extract helped clarify her concern about giving and checking instructions; that is, whether she needed to check her instructions given in each activity.

By the same token, the leaders and the EFL consultant drew on their theoretical knowledge of English language teaching and TEYL to explain the issues behind the teachers' concerns and problems. After the teachers in meeting C1 gave their feedback on how demonstration teacher Mai gave her instructions in different activities, the EFL consultant commented:

'Teacher Mai, you need to notice that these are Year-3 students, so we need to speak slowly and clearly and always bear in your mind an expression. What expression, do you know? ... 'Keep it short and simple'. Let's say this expression chorally Teachers' instruction needs to be ... KISS, keep it short and simple. It is a lovely word, isn't it? We should remember that word.'

(Meeting C1 - 17/01/2013)

The findings suggest that the PETs were not working as reflective practitioners by themselves, but in dialogue with their peers, their PLC's leader and the EFL consultant. The voice of community and experts was highly appreciated by the PETs. By consulting thus, the teachers were making inquiries about their teaching and learning through the social relations that they had in the PLCs, which will be further analysed in Chapter 6.

However, analysis of the data reveals that collaborative inquiry was not fully developed in the PLCs. The PETs' participation in the discussions was not always voluntary, although this is a common characteristic of a teacher community (Hargreaves 2007; Wenger 1998). From the observational data, it is clear that only a small number of the teachers (approximately four or five in each PLC) were willing to 'talk' to the community; the others did not make a contribution to the community unless they were invited. As presented in Section 5.4 above, the EFL consultant and the PLCs' leaders strategically encouraged the PETs to engage more in the discussion sections. Being invited, the teachers gave their feedback on the demonstrations or shared their issues in teaching to be solved by the community or the EFL consultant if he was present (see Chapter 6).

In short, a culture of collaboration was encouraged and enhanced in the PLCs although it was not fully developed. Teachers' collaborative inquiry was promoted through the PLCs' activities such as demonstrating and discussing, but still required the top management of the 'heroic leaders', specifically, the PLCs' leaders and EFL consultant.

5.7 Complex relationships

The literature suggests that positive relationships in the PLCs are a vital factor for successful teacher communities (Cassidy et al. 2008; Hargreaves 2007; Katz & Earl 2010) and are strongly associated with positive shifts in teaching practice (Katz & Earl 2010; Snow-Geron 2005). The findings from the observations of the PLCs and the interviews with the stakeholders reveal complex relationships among the participants in the PLCs.

5.7.1 Collegiality among peer teachers

The observational and interviewing data in this study show that relationships in the PLCs proved to be a fraught issue. It seemed that the level of collegiality or trust among the PETs in the PLC was low. Each PLC included about twenty PETs from seven or eight primary schools across the city (see Chapters 2 and 4). Judging by the way the PETs greeted one another, I found that a majority of the PETs in each PLC knew each other prior to the meetings. Observing different meetings of the same PLC, I became aware that some of the PETs were good friends or close acquaintances and tended to sit near each other. These teachers sometimes had private professional conversations about the issues being discussed in the discussion sections. I could not record clearly these personal conversations as they whispered, but based on the time they started conversing and on their reactions, I believed that they were chatting about the issues being discussed in the community. In meeting C2, I was able to record by note-taking a private conversation between teacher Thuy, who was recruited as one of the individual PETs in this chapter (see Chapter 4) and another PET, when I was sitting next to them. Later in my interviews with teacher Thuy, I learned that these two teachers had been in a critical friendship (Andreu et al. 2003; Dunne & Honts 1998; Farrell 2007; Franzak 2002) although they taught in different schools. They learned from each other by interacting during and after the PLCs' meetings to exchange their experiences, resources and challenges. Teacher Thuy shared in public that *'The lesson went very smoothly with many activities...'*, then turned to her critical friend to say: *'Will it be possible for you to conduct so many activities like that in your class?'* In my interview, teacher Thuy said: *'... I would not do the same in my teaching'* when recalling her experience in meeting C2. This indicates that her private sharing with her critical friend or with me as a researcher was more open and frank than her public sharing, which was also acknowledged by teacher Thuy in my interviews with her.

The underlying reasons for this behaviour seemed to reflect what was found in previous studies on Vietnamese teachers' professional learning. There was a lack of professional dialogue among peer teachers or a lack of frank sharing due to their limited interpersonal trust (Le & Nguyen 2012; Saito, Tsukui & Tanaka 2008)

while among critical friends teachers were more comfortable and open in their sharing (Vo & Nguyen 2010). Therefore, I would say that trust or collegiality among the PETs in the PLCs might not have been developed as sufficiently as among critical friends where they engaged more comfortably in professional communications with their peer PETs.

On the other hand, collegiality among the PETs in the PLCs could be understood in how they perceived themselves as participants. As discussed earlier in this chapter, a large number of the PETs in each PLC tended to listen attentively rather than contributing in the discussion sections unless they were invited. Teacher Thanh (PLC-A) and teacher Anh (PLC-C) were two of these silent participants, they seemed to be very quiet in the PLCs' meetings. In explaining her quietness in the discussion sections, teacher Thanh said: '*... I'm new, and my teaching experience is limited, so I dare not give ideas, but like to listen to the others' to learn*' (Interview 1, 01/02/2013). Similarly, teacher Anh admitted that she was reluctant to contribute her ideas to the community because she felt inferior as a newcomer from a rural school, and thought her ideas or teaching experience might not be appreciated in the community. They both shared that they took careful notes of what they saw and heard in the meetings, particularly the shortcomings of the demonstration teachers, for their future reference.

The findings show that the participation of teachers Thanh and Anh in their PLC was peripheral (Wenger 1998) although they had been members of their PLC for about three or four years at the time of the data collection for this study. Seeing themselves as the newcomers or teachers of an inferior background, these two teachers did not actively interact with other members as expected in a professional community (Aubusson, Ewing & Hoban 2009; Cassidy et al. 2008; DuFour 2004; Little 2012; Stoll 2011). Rather, they chose a safe mode of engagement in the PLCs by paying attention to what was seen and heard in the PLCs. Therefore, it is likely that the other silent teachers in the discussion sections might have chosen a similar safe mode of engagement as the teachers Anh and Thanh did.

In short, the findings in this study suggest that collegiality among the peer PETs in the PLCs had not fully developed. Many teachers tended to turn to their critical friends or school colleagues to discuss professional matters rather than to the

whole community. Some other teachers chose a safe mode of peripheral participation in the PLCs by observing and listening to the others rather than sharing an active voice.

5.7.2 Power relationships

As discussed in Chapter 3, power, either positive or negative, is closely interrelated with leadership. Power relationships are inherent in all organisations or institutions, but the way they are exercised depends on the specific social and cultural context. In a country like Vietnam, institutional power determines how, for example, educational activities are carried out. This research shows that the power relationship between participants in a PLC was influenced by the leadership roles that the participants were officially assigned. It also shows how behaviour was shaped by the cultural expectations that the participants in that specific setting placed on each other.

In Section 5.4 above, leadership roles were analysed at the level of how the participants managed PETs' learning in the PLCs. In this section, my analysis focuses on the power relationships among participants in the PLCs; there are distinct characteristics to these relationships given the particular context of Vietnamese society, where the power distance is large, and senior teachers and leaders are culturally respected (Hofstede 2011; Hofstede, Hofstede & Minkov 2010). From the observational and interview data, it is apparent that relationships among the participants in a PLC were influenced by the power of expertise and authority that the PLCs' leaders and the EFL consultant brought to the community.

In the first place, the findings show that relationships between the PETs and their PLCs' leaders were hierarchical. From my observations, this kind of relationship was more prominent in the three PLCs A, B and C than in the PLC-D. As an insider researcher (see Chapter 4), I know that the leaders of the three PLCs are the senior PETs of the city and co-examiners of the DOET, who have periodical evaluative observations of the PETs across the city. Therefore, these leaders are not only colleagues, but may act as supervisors of the PETs. These leaders brought their insight and experience in TEYL to mediate the PETs' learning in the PLCs (see Chapter 6 for further analysis).

While the teachers in meeting B1 gave feedback on how the demonstration teacher had her students practise the new structure in the practice stage, leader Quyen, in a determined voice, shared her experience in conducting a drill:

Leader Quyen: *'As usual, when teacher elicits the pattern from better students, she should repeat the pattern so that the weaker ones can hear clearly. For example, teacher points to the picture and asks: 'where's the bed?', one student said: 'It's in the bedroom'; teacher repeats: 'Where's the bed?' and invites one or two weaker students to answer: 'It's in the bedroom' and then the whole class. Teacher just repeats once quickly. If weaker can't hear from better friends, s/he can hear from teacher one more time, so they feel more confident to work on their own. Then, open pairs and close pairs... that's it.'*

Teacher Lan (T. Lan): *Ms Quyen, do you mean with all pictures?*

T. Vi: *We may not have enough time.*

Leader Quyen: *Yes. No need to repeat many times. But after eliciting from better students, teacher should repeat quickly, weaker students can repeat.*

T. Tu: *Usually I work with the first two sentences, then let students themselves work with the rest.*

Leader Quyen: *No, not enough. Modeling is a must before close pairs.*

(Meeting B1 - 13/01/2013)

Leader Quyen carefully explained to the community the steps of conducting a drill and insisted on the significance of modeling when the other teachers raised the issue of limited time allocation. Leader Quyen seemed to be very confident about what she shared with the community.

In return, the PETs tended to respect their leader's insight and experience. They sometimes posed their concerns to the leaders for their advice. One teacher in meeting A3 asked the leader: *'Ms Xuan, Do you know the Race Ball or something Ball ...? How to play it? I heard of it, but never play it? Do you know?'* (Meeting A3 - 02/01/2014) or an experienced teacher in meeting C1 turned to leader Thi and asked: *'Ms Thi, I have a concern. In this book, there's a vocabulary section. They [the authors] suggest three words. That means they want us to pre-teach those three words. Is that right?'* (Meeting C1 - 17/01/2013).

In my interviews, these leaders confirmed that the PETs in their PLCs expected them to finalise what had been discussed at the end of the discussion sections. At the end of meeting C3, leader Thi said:

'Now, I'd like to synthesise all of your opinions. The lesson was very good, the teacher was active, interacted well with her students, and managed all the activities well. You [teachers] have discussed many issues, but I want to highlight the following points. About teacher Thu's concern [writing a formula of 'There is or are' on board], Year 2 students are young, so they learn mainly by imitating,'

(Meeting C3 - 12/12/2013)

The observational data show that this tendency did not occur in PLC-D, whose leader seemed to be more collegial. Besides her role of moderating the discussion, she engaged in the discussion sections as the other PETs in the PLC-D to analyse the strengths and shortcomings of the demonstration, which is illustrated in the following extract:

Leader Phuong: *About ending sounds,.... um, for example, the word 'want', /t/ or 'milk', /k/... Tram (demonstration teacher) almost forgot that part.*

Teacher Mai (T. Mai): *Yeah, when teacher taught [the word explicitly], she did pronounce /k/, but then, she forgot, only say 'milk' [no ending sound /k/].*

Leader Phuong: *Yeah, the teacher had students listen to the recording. [students] Listening, but not able to imitate.*

T. Hanh: *But it's risky that the teacher pronounces in one way, the recording says in another way.*

T. Tu: *Or I think it's better not to have students listen to the recording, just the teachers says and students repeat. Is that ok?*

T. Van: *Yeah, it's better not to use the recording.*

(Meeting D1 - 23/01/2013)

The extract shows that like other PETs, leader Phuong gave feedback on demonstration teacher Tram's pronunciation of ending sounds and the other PETs also engaged in the dialogue. At the end of the discussion, leader Phuong did not give any more comment on the others' ideas on whether to use recordings to model. This finding suggests that leader Phuong was so not determined in her feedback as leader Quyen as shown in the above extract or as leader Xuan (see Section 5.6). Unlike the PLCs A, B and C, the PETs in the PLC-D did not ask for leader Phuong's advice on a specific issue or final comments on what had been discussed.

Taken these together, the teachers in the PLCs A, B and C interacted with their leaders as advisors or an expert in the field of TEYL and these leaders also found themselves superior to the PETs in terms of insight and experience in TEYL (see further analysis in Chapter 6).

It was more significant to notice in the findings the power relationship among the PETs, the PLCs' leaders and the EFL consultant. Being a leader from the DOET, the EFL consultant was respected by the PETs and the PLCs' leaders for his expertise and authority, which is illustrated in the following examples from observations and interviews.

From the observational data collected in the PLCs' meetings, it is clear that the leaders of the four PLCs always insisted on the advantage of having the consultant to attend the PLCs' meetings.

In meeting A2, the PLC-A's leader said:

'.... Today we have the honour to welcome Mr Kim, the consultant from the Department of Education and Training to our meeting. He has attended the MOET's courses on the teaching methods and assessment for the new MOET's textbooks. [To the consultant] So, we hope that you [the consultant] could give us some direct advice and thoughtful feedback on the lesson so that we become more familiar with the new materials.'

(Meeting A2, 07/11/2013)

Known as an insightful and experienced PET in the city, Ms Quyen, the PLC-B's leader, also highlighted the significance of the EFL consultant's advice.

Acknowledging the power of the consultant's voice in shaping her and the other PETs' knowledge, Ms Quyen admitted:

'...it's good to have him [the consultant] If we want to discuss some professional issues and need some agreement with ... an expert, we can ask straight away, it's easier. That's ... if we need any agreement on some professional issues, we can ask immediately. Easy ... with him, any concerns, we can ask for his direct advice. Directly in the meeting, it's better to solve the problems.'

(Interview, 01/02/2013)

Additionally, the findings show that in most of the meetings with the consultant's presence, the PETs tended to pose their questions or concerns to the consultant, not to the other teachers. They started their questions by *Mr, Could I ask you ...?* or *Mr, do you think I should?* or finished their questions by *Mr, is it appropriate to do it like that?*

This indicates that both the PLCs' leaders and the PETs expected the EFL consultant to provide a remedy or direct advice on what would be good for their teaching. For them, the EFL consultant was not only an expert in the TEYL field, but also an authority from the DOET, whose voice weighed heavily in shaping the PETs' teaching practice. On the other hand, analysis of the observational findings indicates that the EFL consultant himself also perceived his role as an advisor when attending the meetings. He did not give his feedback on the demonstrations or his response to the teachers' concerns until the end of the discussions. He highlighted the strengths of the demonstrations, suggested some ways to improve the lessons, and drew on the theories of English language teaching and learning. More noticeably, the EFL consultant showed his authority in advising the PETs to change their perspectives of a good English lesson. In most of the meetings, he insisted that the PETs must be 'flexible and creative' and should not follow a rigid model sequence.

The findings reveal that the PETs interacted with their PLC's leaders and both looked to the EFL consultant for his sharing of expertise in the TEYL field and for direct advice from a leader at the departmental level. Different from the

relationship among the peer PETs, that interaction reflected the power relationship between the less insightful and the more knowledgeable and between the inferior and the superior in terms of knowledge and authority. This tendency is inevitable in Vietnamese society, where culturally, teachers and leaders are respected and followed by their students and followers (Hofstede 2011). Chapter 6 will present an in-depth analysis of how this kind of hierarchical or power relationship among the PETs, the PLCs' leaders and the EFL consultant allowed for the PETs' learning in the PLCs.

To sum up, the PLCs in the present study accommodated complex relationships among the participants. Collegiality or a trusting relationship among the peer PETs had not fully developed so that they did not freely share their frank ideas with the community, but sometimes turned to their critical friends instead. On the other hand, in the PLCs, a hierarchical or power relationship between the PETs and the leaders, namely the PLCs' leaders and EFL consultant was significant. The PETs turned to these leaders for their insight or expertise and direct advice on how to improve their English language teaching at primary schools.

5.8 Summary of the chapter

This chapter provides a detailed account of the features that the PLCs in Thanh Van in Vietnam incorporated. Taking a sociocultural perspective on teacher learning, I have borne in mind the assumption that teacher learning is a context-sensitive and socially interactive activity while analysing the findings of this present study. I was able to discover six key features of PLCs that were both similar to the PLCs reviewed in the literature and unique to the particular context where the PETs in Thanh Van were learning to teach.

The first feature is that the PLCs were derived from the PETs' professional learning needs. The development of the PLCs in the city was set up by the DOET to reduce the PETs' professional isolation. The isolated PETs from primary schools of diverse conditions and of various teaching experience now had a community from which to learn to teach EFL to their primary school students. Additionally, the PETs' learning needs were taken into account in scheduling the PLCs' activities. The most preferred activities in the PLCs were observing demonstrations of challenging

topics and analysing their strengths and shortcomings. The topics of the demonstration lessons were varied across the PLCs depending on the PETs' challenges in their teaching.

The second feature is that the PLCs were embedded within the formal structure of hierarchical institutions, specifically the DOET and primary schools. Despite being derived from the PETs' learning needs, the PLCs were not developed in a voluntary process, but with a formal hierarchy. It was an official and compulsory professional learning activity. The PLCs' activities required official approval from the DOET and primary schools and the PETs were obliged to attend the PLCs' activities. Therefore, the PETs attended the PLCs' activities regularly in spite of their heavy workload at schools and other commitments.

The third feature is that the PLCs involved two layers of leadership, including informal and formal leadership. The PLCs aimed at distributing leadership among the participants, particularly the PETs. The PETs in each PLC were actively involved in scheduling the PLCs' activities in relation to their needs and time availability. However, the target of distributing leadership among the PETs sometimes failed when the PLCs' leaders took control of what the PETs needed to learn. On the other hand, the formal leadership of the PLCs' leaders and the EFL consultant was prominently exercised in developing and implementing the PLCs' activities. The PLCs' leaders and EFL consultant facilitated and organised the learning activities and promoted the PETs' engagement by the use of different strategies. Without their formal management and support, the PLCs' activities would not have been implemented.

Additionally, the PLCs' leaders cultivated the PETs' reflective and collaborative inquiry by conducting the commonly preferred observation and discussion activities. Both the demonstration and observer teachers reflected on their teachings while observing and engaging in the discussions. Their reflections were done both by themselves and in collaboration with the others including peer PETs, PLCs' leaders and the EFL consultant if present. Concerns and issues were posed and solved by the community, or specifically by the leaders or the EFL consultant. However, a culture of collaboration was not fully developed in the PLCs due to the complexity in the participants' relationships.

Last but not least, the PLCs involved complex relationships among the participants. Collegiality among the PETs was developed, but not fully. The PETs in each PLC seemed to know each other, but a number of them were still peripheral participants or newcomers to the community. A large number of the PETs were reluctant to share frank ideas with the community, but tended to be open with their critical friends. In addition, a power relationship was realised among the PETs, the PLCs' leaders and the EFL consultant. The power of expertise and authority was noticeably highlighted by the participants. The PETs, who were less experienced and powerful, tended to turn to the leaders, who were more experienced, and more knowledgeable, for their advice on what was the best solution to their teaching problem/s. With the authority of a leader from the DOET, the EFL consultant was even expected to provide direct advice or remedies for the PETs' teaching.

In conclusion, the PLCs of the PETs in Thanh Van in Vietnam incorporated the important features that any PLCs should have, but also allowed the unique features relating to the particularities of the context. The next chapter (Chapter 6) will present a detailed analysis of how the PLCs enabled the PETs' learning. Also in Chapter 6, some of the findings that were presented in this chapter will be further analysed.

CHAPTER 6: The Affordances of Professional Learning Communities for Teacher Learning

6.1 Introduction

The previous chapter presented features of the PLCs for the PETs in Thanh Van in Vietnam. They included the significant features that any PLCs may have (Cassidy et al. 2008; Katz & Earl 2010; Stoll 2011) and other features unique to the particular social, cultural and political features of the context in which they operated. Taken from a sociocultural perspective, teacher learning is regarded to be 'normative and life-long; it is built through experiences in multiple social contexts' (Johnson 2009, p. 10). Holding to this premise of teacher learning, this study also aimed to investigate how the PET's professional learning was likely to happen when the PLCs, with both common and unique features, were shaped within this study's context (see Chapter 5). This goal is reflected in the second research question: *'In what ways do the PLCs support the learning process of the primary school English language teachers in Thanh Van?'*

This chapter presents the findings of how the PETs' professional learning was afforded through the learning opportunities available in the PLCs. Two sources of data including observations of the PLCs' meetings, and interviews with the stakeholders, namely the teachers, PLCs' leaders and EFL consultant were drawn on to provide a detailed account of the PETs' learning process. The findings on the PETs' learning were also confirmed by the analysis of the stakeholders' voices on the PLCs' benefits.

6.2 Possible learning opportunities in the professional learning communities

Derived from the PETs' desire for learning to teach EFL at primary schools, the PLCs have been implemented since 2008 in Thanh Van (see Chapter 2). The PETs' learning needs were taken into account in deciding the types and topics of the PLCs' activities (see Chapter 5). The most preferred activity was observing an English language lesson delivered to primary school students followed by a

discussion section on the strengths and shortcomings of the lesson and relevant issues in their teaching practice (see Appendix A). These activities allowed for the PETs' learning in two major ways: they learned by reflecting on their own teaching and by socially interacting with the participants in the PLCs.

6.2.1 Learning by reflecting:

As presented in Chapter 5, the PLCs helped cultivate a culture of reflective inquiry among the PETs through their activities, including observations and discussions. This section aims to provide a more in-depth analysis of the findings from observations of the PLCs' activities and interviews with the PLCs' leaders and PETs on how the culture of reflective inquiry was afforded in the PLCs and enabled the PETs' learning.

6.2.1.1 Demonstration teachers reflected on their own teachings

The observational data show that the PLCs' activities allowed the demonstration teachers to articulate their reflective thoughts on their own teachings while interacting with the other PETs.

As observed in the discussion sections in the PLCs, the demonstration teachers were usually invited to reflect by recalling the objectives of their lesson or the challenges in preparing and delivering the demonstrations. When explained further by the EFL consultant, the demonstration teachers' reflections helped the observer teachers to understand the underlying rationale for each teaching behaviour and therefore they were able to provide more useful feedback.

For example, at the beginning of the discussion section in meeting B2, the consultant suggested that the demonstration teacher Hong explain the objectives of her reading lesson. Teacher Hong stated:

'...I'd like to share the goals of my lesson. The goals of this lesson are to help the students to read, to enjoy, and to be familiar with the reading text. ... developing the students' vocabulary; the target skills in this reading lesson are reading for information and developing vocabulary, reading for details'

(Meeting B2 – 04/12/2013)

She continued to clearly explain the specific objectives of each activity in her reading lesson. Analysing the observational data of PLCs' meetings, I found that the other demonstration teachers did not describe their lesson's objectives as explicitly as teacher Hong. However, such an opportunity was useful for all of the demonstration teachers to recall their objectives and to consider whether their objectives were obtained or not.

The observational data show that most of the teachers took further steps to critically analyse their teachings. Teacher Ly in meeting C1, after explaining the objectives of her lesson, said:

"In this lesson, I aimed at introducing the song and have my students practise singing the song. But, I regretted that I didn't ask the students to mime while singing. Students like miming. That makes them learn more quickly."

(Meeting C1 - 17/01/2013)

Similarly, teacher Phuong in meeting D2 reflected on her teaching and realised her shortcoming:

'... in the third part, I myself find it a bit long. When I had my students do the third exercise, that is, listening to the sounds and do an exercise. That part may be too long. I may cut the third part and have my students practise more in the first and second parts - sounds and chant.'

(Meeting D2 - 29/11/2013)

It is clear from the findings that they pointed out the shortcomings in their teachings. They did not combine different senses in students' learning (teacher Ly – Meeting C1), not correct students' mistakes frequently enough (teacher Hang – Meeting C3) or conducted too many activities (teacher Lan – Meeting A2, teacher Phuong – Meeting D2), and thought about some alternatives to put in place in their future lessons.

When the discussion sections were taking place, the demonstration teachers, particularly the more experienced PETs (meetings B1, B2, and C2) responded to the other PETs' feedback by explaining the rationale for their teaching behaviours.

Being asked why she did not follow the model's steps of presenting new words as they were expected to, teacher Hanh in meeting B1 quickly responded in English:

'That issue, I've already asked That's not necessary. If the teacher models new words 3 times, students repeat 3 times, that means the teacher must speak 6 times. But now I shortened, I spoke only three times – I normally model and my students repeat at the same time....Before, ...when I taught in a teacher competition, I did the same steps. ... Attending workshops, they did the same steps as you said, but in my teaching, I usually do this way to save time....'

(Meeting B1 - 13/01/2013)

The above example suggests that the teacher Hanh was aware of the issue that she and the other PETs were concerned with. That is, whether or not they should follow the model's steps of presenting new words to their students that they learned in their English language methodology courses at college or university and from the workshops they attended. It is apparent that teacher Hanh was negotiating the conflicting contemporary realities (Kumaravadivelu 2012) of time allocation in her practice to decide on the steps of presenting a new word to her students. She reconstructed her preferred method to teach her own students in her particular context; this is a process which Kumaravadivelu (2012) calls personal knowledge. The other teachers in her PLC might not have completely agreed with her choice in modeling the new words, but might have been persuaded by her unique way of teaching her particular group of students in her particular school.

Taking these together, the findings reveal that it was the teachers themselves who were 'best suited to describe the thinking behind their decision and actions' (Kumaravadivelu 2012, p. 105). The demonstration teachers were able to reflect on their teaching action (Schön 1987) in the discussion sections. Straight after their lesson finished, they recalled and discussed their teaching by clarifying their demonstration's goal and objectives, analysing unsuccessful parts of their teaching and critically responding to the concerns or issues raised by the observers. By doing so, the teachers were critically self-evaluating their own teaching, which 'is of considerable value as a process of consciousness raising and enhancing

understanding' (Walsh 2006, cited in Kumaravadivelu 2012, p. 107). By the same token, the teachers made sense of their realities when making their teaching decisions and understood what would be best for their particular students so that their English language teaching would be more accessible to them. In short, the demonstration teachers developed their personal knowledge or sense of plausibility (Kumaravadivelu 2012; Prabhu 1990) through reflection on their teachings.

6.2.1.2 The observer PETs reflected on their previous teachings

The observer PETs were encouraged to recall their previous teaching experience when engaging in the discussion sections. Analysing the data obtained in observing the PLCs' meetings and interviewing the PETs provided a rich account of how the observer PETs were able to learn by reflecting.

Prior to their attendance at the PLCs' meetings, the observer PETs had taught English language at a primary school for a period of time, ranging from three months (teacher Trang in meeting B1) to more than ten years. They might have taught the students of the same year or have used the same materials as the demonstration teachers. The topics or activities of the demonstrations they observed might be similar to ones they had conducted before. It was understandable that the observer teachers recalled what they had done in their English language classes while or after observing the demonstrations. Their reflections were either shared with the community or kept private as their own learning resource.

'Public' reflections

Analysis of the observational data shows that although the PET participants were not always eager to contribute actively in the discussion sections (see Chapter 5), most of the teachers tended to recall their previous teaching experience when sharing their challenges and successes. They critically analysed their experiences and self-evaluated to consider whether they had done better or worse than the demonstration teachers. For example, in meeting C2, where the demonstration was

considered a good English lesson by most of the participants, one young teacher said:

'I like the lesson very much. Yesterday, I taught one demonstration lesson at school, a reading for comprehension lesson too, to be observed by other teachers. But I find my teaching was much worse than the lesson [I observed] today. I like the Lucky Number game best. From that, I can learn that it's important to engage students more in conducting feedback on a reading activity. The students were excited and active in giving their answer to each question. ... Also, I think not only in a demonstration lesson, but in everyday teaching, I had better conduct various activities, so students get used to them, teachers will have such a successful lesson.'

(Meeting C2 – 13/11/2013)

The extract shows that the young teacher reflected on her teaching to analyse what she would do better in her English lesson, engaging students more in checking students' comprehension and conducting more activities in each lesson.

Taking a step further after seeing the strengths of the demonstration lessons, the observer PETs also critically analysed the possibility of copying what was seen in the 'perfect' demonstration lessons. In meeting B2, one experienced PET shared:

"Observing the lesson, I found that the teacher Hong taught very effectively, using only English as her language of instruction her students could understand [instruction] and it worked very efficiently. Her sequence was smooth and well-linked. Her lesson was exciting and attractive. For the students in my school ... to have such a successful lesson, ... imagine ... quite hard... My students have limited vocabulary, listening skill is not good. Also, I have to move from class to class and have no projector and not enough pictures to elicit ... so it may be hard for me."

(Meeting B2 – 04/12/2013).

For this teacher, it would be hard or impossible to conduct such an interesting, smooth and interactive English lesson in her current primary school because her

students' English language level was low and learning facilities were limited. She was not able to use English as her only language of instruction or use many pictures or PowerPoint slides, nor could she conduct as many learning activities in her English lessons. In short, while observing the other teachers, the PETs reflected on their own teaching with a more thorough understanding of their particular teaching context and considered the possibilities of appropriate teaching methods.

Furthermore, the observational and interview data reveal that the observer PETs recalled their previous teachings when making suggestions about how to improve the demonstration lessons. For instance, in meeting A1, after observing teacher Mai delivering a lesson of an English story, some of the observer PETs shared the teaching techniques that they had used in teaching English stories before. One teacher advised teacher Mai: *'You'd better introduce the setting of the story, for example, in the park. Use the pictures to introduce, students can visualize the scene and then teacher starts eliciting what each character said in that setting'*. Another teacher in the meeting suggested: *'... about the role-play, the teacher had better ask students to practise their roles in their group first, then inviting them to act out in front of the class.'* (Meeting A1 - 24/01/2013). This teacher explained that by doing this, the students would have more practice time and build confidence in their language performance, which are regarded as vital factor in the success of language learning in general and of younger learners' learning a foreign language in particular (Brown 2015; Harmer 2015).

The findings of the PETs' shared reflections suggest that if they had not recalled their previous experience in teaching a reading lesson or an English story, utilising teaching aids, or using English as a language of instruction, these observer teachers would not have been able to engage in such reflective dialogues nor share their ideas or suggestions in the PLCs. They did not observe only to copy what and how the demonstration teachers taught, but to engage in critical analysis of what they had watched. The PETs were 'seeing' the activities or critical incidents in the demonstrations from the perspectives of a teacher and an observer to 'produce valuable and valued insights for them to see their work in a new and critical light' (Kumaravadivelu 2012, p. 107). By the same token, they were able to develop their own image of what a good English language lesson or a good English language

teacher should be like, or to recognise their professional identity (Beijaard, Meijer & Verloop 2004) or their teacher identity roles of being primary school English teachers (Farrell 2011).

'Private' reflections

As seen from the observational and interview data, a number of PETs reflected on their teaching when engaging in the PLCs' activities, but did not always publicly share their reflections. It was found in analysing the observational data that some teachers were very active in some of the PLCs' meetings, and were 'quiet' in the others. Also, a large number of the teachers in the PLCs were reluctant to contribute to the discussions unless they were invited (see Chapter 5). However, the reticence of the PETs in the PLCs does not denote that they were not engaging or not learning. Analysing the interviews with the PETs conducted after the PLCs' meetings, it was found that the 'quiet' PETs actually engaged in the PLCs as thoughtful learners, undertaking 'critical auto-ethnography' (Kumaravadivelu 2012, p. 69) of their teaching upon seeing the others. Their reflections were kept as their own learning resources, illustrated by the following examples.

Talking with the teachers, I recorded a number of the PETs' 'private' reflections on the demonstration lesson of reading for comprehension delivered by demonstration teacher Cuc in meeting C2 (see Appendix A). This lesson was generally considered to be 'perfect' by the participants in the PLC-C. In my interviews, teachers Thuy and Anh shared a similar view that the lesson went so smoothly and included so many activities that they could not replicate it with their students. These two teachers taught at two third-ranked primary schools in the outskirts of the city (see Chapter 4). Their schools were poorer, the teaching resources more limited in terms of quantity and quality, and the students' level of English language lower than the ones of teacher Cuc. Teacher Anh said:

'I think that the teacher spent little time on students' reading [aloud]. My students need more practice. Reading [aloud] in that amount of time is not enough And I don't design games on PowerPoint as teacher Cuc because my school has only one projector used for all teachers. It's not convenient at all.'

(Interview 2 – 29/11/2013)

Reflecting on the same lesson, teacher Thuy confided in:

'In my teaching, I don't carry out so many activities in a reading lesson as teacher Cuc. My students, not good [at English], I want them to practise saying new words more. They need more time on reading the text and do exercise.'

(Interview 2 – 03/12/2013)

Talking about the same lesson, teacher Lai thought that teacher Cuc interacted with her students in an unemotional voice, like a talking machine. She said:

'Observing teacher Cuc's lesson, I found that she was too 'mechanical'. Her compliments or instructions didn't reflect her emotion. No emotion at all in her voice, gestures or eye contact, like a talking machine. Not at all. I think I need to avoid this mistake. In my class, I always try to be friendly and to understand students' personal lives.'

(Interview 2 - 02/12/2013)

The findings suggest that the reflections on teacher Cuc's lesson were not shared in meeting C2, but silently done in these teachers' mind. Teachers Anh and Thuy critically analysed the particularities of their context, students with a low level of English and a limited access to technology, and decided to design their teaching in accordance to these particularities. For teacher Lai, it was important to establish a good rapport with her students by understanding their personal lives, and being friendly and interacting well with them. She wanted to create an image of a friendly and caring PET, which she had found important to engage her students.

Talking with other PETs, who appeared to be 'quiet' or less active learners in the discussion sections, I was able to record their private reflections on what they had done and seen. They were teacher Trang (PLC-B) and teacher Dung (PLC-D), who were 'new' to their teaching profession and to the PLCs, and teacher Thanh (PLC-A), who saw herself as 'shy'. After observing two lessons in the PLC-B, teacher Trang shared: *'I just started my teaching more than one year. Observing the other teachers in the community, steps of a lesson become clearer to me now. ... Also, I*

found that the teachers [observed] used English a lot, their sentences were short, their instructions were clear. My instructions were rather long.' (Interview 2 - 10/12/2013). In a similar vein, teacher Dung said: *'The teachers I observed in my PLC were very experienced. Their teaching performance was excellent. Their language of instruction was clear, in a loud voice. I usually speak too fast and seldom use English.'* (Interview 2 - 05/12/2013). Likewise, teacher Thanh reflected on her learning experience in the PLC-A and said: *'I like the teachers' recommendations on using pictures to contextualize, ... helping students to understand the whole first and then elicit specific statements. I didn't do like that before. In this lesson, I applied, it worked very successfully I think.'* (Interview 1 - 01/02/2013).

The observational and interview data show that these PETs did not often raise their active voice in the discussions, but engaged in the learning process in the PLCs in their own way. They observed the demonstrations, attentively listened to the discussions and quietly reflected on the shortcomings in their own teaching. Returning to their English lessons, these teachers tried to make some transformations in order to make their teaching more accessible to their students.

The above-mentioned findings of the PETs' reflections suggest that these observer teachers acted as the owner and subject in the reflection process (Schön 1983) when recalling their own teaching experience, even if they did not share their reflections publicly in the PLCs. It may be argued that keeping reflections private is not appreciated in a learning community, where its participants are encouraged to contribute as many ideas as possible. The possible reasons for keeping reflection as the teachers' private learning tool may include the limited collegiality among the peer PETs in the PLCs (see Chapter 5) or that the PETs may be afraid of being criticised or being blamed for criticising the others, as explained by one PET interviewed in this study. The tendency of teachers to criticise or evaluate each other has been proved to be common in professional learning in other settings in Vietnam (Le & Nguyen 2012; Saito, Tsukui & Tanaka 2008). Being situated in the specific contexts of professional learning that Le and Nguyen (2012) and Saito, Tsukui and Tanaka (2008) focused on, the teachers' tendency of having evaluation-oriented feedback may or may not be relevant to the context of PETs' learning in this study. Although the reasons for the PETs' silence were not clearly discerned in

this study, the findings of this study clearly show that the PLCs provided the PETs with opportunities to reflect on their own teaching. Their reflections were either shared in public or kept for their own reference. By the same token, they 'critically interpret[ed] their teaching self' (Kumaravadivelu 2012, p. 69) or '[made] sense of themselves' as PETs (Cochran-Smith & Lytle 1999, p. 712) upon seeing and listening to the others. In this self-observational and self-reflective process, these teachers were able to develop or reconstruct 'the self-image of who they are as professionals' (Kumaravadivelu 2012, p. 69) or to identify their professional role identities (Farrell 2011) of PETs. Their self-image of being a friendly teacher, using clear English language, or favouring visuals in an English lesson would influence their choice of teaching methods.

Generally, the findings of this study suggest that demonstrations and discussion sections in the PLCs' meetings worked as stimulus for reflections by both the demonstration and observer PETs. Some of the reflections were shared publicly to the PLC while some were kept as their own learning resources and not shared with the community as intended. Sharing publicly or not, the findings indicate that the observer PETs in the PLCs learned by reflecting on what they did, saw, and heard. Bringing their self-image of a PET to observe the demonstrations, they critically analysed in what ways (or not) the demonstrator teachers managed their English language classrooms better than they had done. Also, analysis of the observational and interview data shows that PETs in the PLCs took into account the particularities of their teaching practice in deciding whether they would act similarly to or differently from the demonstration teachers. This indicates that the PETs were moving in the direction of 'internal mediation controlled by individual learners' (Johnson & Golombek 2003, p. 731) or 'internalisation' that Vygotskian sociocultural theory refers to in understanding how teachers learn (Johnson 2009, p. 18). The PETs learned to develop their eclecticism or personal knowledge when deciding appropriate teaching styles for their particular group of students, or developing a teaching method that was most appropriate to their own situation. This kind of learning was not only an individual endeavour of the PETs, but also a social endeavour of all the participants in the community. The next section will

present an in-depth analysis of how the PETs learned through their social relations with the other teachers, the PLCs' leaders and the EFL consultant.

6.2.2 Learning through social interactions

From a sociocultural perspective, teacher learning is mediated through goal-directed social activities (Johnson & Golombek 2011). The findings show that the PLCs created such goal-oriented social activities as observations and discussions, in order to professionally mix the PETs across Thanh Van. They learned by socially interacting with the other teachers, the PLCs' leaders and the EFL consultant.

6.2.2.1 Interactions among the PETs:

As noted in the Context chapter (Chapter 2), the major goal of the PLCs is to enable the PETs from different primary schools across Thanh Van to learn from each other. Despite teaching at different primary schools and having varied teaching experience, these teachers have a shared domain of interest in learning to teach the English language. They also share a repertoire of teaching practice, including primary school English language curriculum, English textbooks, learning and teaching facilities, and language policy (see Chapter 2). The findings in this study reveal that by bringing their diversity and commonalities to the PLCs, the PETs were able to socially interact with their peers through the PLCs' activities in which they engaged.

Firstly, it was found in analysis of the observational and interview data that social interactions among the PETs started when the demonstration teachers prepared their lessons. In each meeting of the PLCs, one PET of any teaching experience or qualification took a turn to demonstrate an EFL lesson to be observed by the community. The PLCs' leaders usually moderated this learning opportunity by inviting different PETs in their PLC to deliver a demonstration lesson. Although the PLCs' leaders and the PETs did not expect the demonstration lessons to be perfect, the demonstration teachers usually prepared intensively for their lessons. In preparation, the demonstration teachers tended to interact with the colleagues from their school or their PLC's leaders who seemed to be more insightful and experienced PETs for a professional purpose; that is, designing a good English

language lesson on a challenging topic (see Section 5.2 and Appendix A). They discussed the content, appropriate types and sequence of activities and the design of good teaching aids for their lesson. This kind of social interaction between the demonstration teachers and the senior PETs or leaders was similar to a form of collaborative learning called *lesson study group*, which has been proved to be effective in teacher professional growth (Tasker 2011). The demonstration teachers' learning was based on designing, developing and delivering a good English language lesson on a certain topic. In this sense, teacher learning was in accordance with the notion of scaffolding in language learning (Lantolf 2000). The teachers were scaffolded by the more capable ones and grew within the zone of proximal development (Johnson & Golombek 2003). The demonstration teachers were confident to deliver an English language lesson to be observed by the whole community.

Additionally, the observational data show that the PETs were offered more opportunities to professionally interact when engaging in the discussion sections in the PLCs' meetings. As discussed in Chapter 5, in most of the PLCs' meetings, the PLCs' leaders and the EFL consultant moderated the discussion sections by emphasising the value of learning from each other to promote peer interaction among the PETs. With the leaders' moderation, the PETs themselves became aware of the significance of professional interaction or the voice of the community in their learning process. It is clear from the observations of the discussion sections that the PETs were interested in learning about 'facilitating the flow of their lesson and channelising it in the right direction' (Kumaravadivelu 2012, p. 29). They often discussed the sequence of different topics in an English lesson, or the steps involved in teaching new language items, new vocabulary or language patterns. Professional interactions among the PETs in a PLC are illustrated by the following extract from the discussion section in meeting C1:

Teacher Huong (T. Huong): *I'd like to ask. After the teacher taught five new words, should she have the students to say the words once or twice before writing [copying those words onto their notebook]? Teacher Ly did after.*

T. Thu: *Yes, after writing.*

T. Huong: *But I think it's better to have students say the words before writing.*

T. An: *Yeah, I think so.*

T. Huong: *And I have another idea in teaching vocabulary. After eliciting new words, teacher models, shows the words, students look and repeat after the teacher, and then clarify their meaning. I think that order is more logical.*

T. An: *and checking vocabulary is needed as well.*

(Meeting C1, 13/01/2013)

The findings reveal that PETs interacted with their peers in the community when analyzing the strengths and shortcomings of the demonstrations or asking for an advice on their concerns about teaching (see Section 5.6). Based on the 'lived experiences' (Johnson 2006, p. 241) from the demonstrations, the PETs discussed other skills for managing their English language classrooms, such as visualising the content of an English story (A1), using audio recordings in teaching new structure or vocabulary (B1, D1), designing PowerPoint slides (C1, C3) or allocating time for students' language practice (A1, D2). These skills are known as parts of 'the procedural knowledge', which language teachers need to learn in order to maximise their students' learning opportunities (Kumaravadivelu 2012, p. 29). Furthermore, it was found in this study that collective expertise weighed heavily in developing individual teachers' knowledge. The PETs sometimes turned to the community for their collective advice on certain issues in their teaching. They asked for their colleagues' experience in conducting language games with Year 1 students with limited lexical knowledge (teacher Trang in meeting B1), sequencing the steps of presenting a language drill (teacher Tram in meeting D1) or adapting learning activities suggested in the MOET's new textbook (teacher Lan in meeting A2) and so on. Different ideas from the PETs in each PLC were suggested regarding the different concerns.

It was found from the data that social interactions among the PETs in the discussions sometimes took place as reflective dialogues on the 'critical incidents' (Richards & Farrell 2005, p. 113) in the demonstrations. As discussed in the previous section, PETs in the PLCs learned through reflection. The observational data show that PETs' reflections usually involved interactions between the demonstration teacher and the other PETs in the meetings. One incident from the demonstration was pointed out and followed by a reflective dialogue. The following extract from meeting B1

illustrates the PET's learning in their reflective dialogues. The dialogue involved demonstration teacher Hanh and teacher Nga, who raised an incident of student's note copying, and the other PETs in meeting B1.

Teacher Nga (T. Nga): *Let me share an idea about students' copying notes. When Hanh asked them to copy, and then to play the game, some students were busy with writing and did not pay attention.*

Teacher Hanh (demonstration teacher): *I said: 'Put your pen down'.*

T. Nga: *No, but some students kept writing. Why don't you let them copy at the end?*

T. Hanh: *That's what I was concerned about. Because I tried to divide [the lesson] into small section and have the students copy. Or it is possible to save some time at the end for students' copying.*

T. Tu: *Is that about the structure?*

T. An: *That's....*

T. Hanh: *That's all OK. But if the students copy too slowly, I must ask: 'Put your pen down'.*

Others: *Yeah*

T. Hanh: *I can't wait for them to finish. Those who are copying and playing, it's impossible to wait for them.*

T. Nga: *You said 'put your pen down', but the students ..., oh no ... some followed, the others kept copying. If so, we can't control the class, the class will be unfocused.*

.....

(Meeting B1 - 13/01/2013)

This discussion continued for another two minutes, and involved mainly the demonstration teacher Hanh and teacher Nga while the other PETs sometimes showed their agreement or disagreement. From this extract of their discussion, it is clear that the teachers socially interacted to exchange their ideas of when their students should be asked to copy the notes the teachers wrote on the board. The PETs engaged in such a reflective dialogue by recalling their previous experience in

managing their students' copying, and drawing on their students' attention in their English language classrooms. The particular characteristics of their primary school students, like copying slowly, playing while copying, and how difficult it is to draw their attention, were taken into consideration in their discussion of the possibilities for managing their classrooms. The findings suggest that these teachers did not necessarily have conflicts in that interaction, but brought their diverse views on an orderly language classroom to interact professionally. Teacher Nga expected that all her students would be engaged in the learning activities, while teacher Hanh believed that her students had to follow her instructions, either to copy notes or to participate in a learning activity.

Towards the end of this conversation, these PETs did not agree on a clear-cut answer to the issue of students' copying. Instead, teacher Nga insisted on the advantage of delaying students' copying before leader Quyen led the discussion to another topic.

.....

Teacher Nga: *Like in the lesson today, I'll ask my students to copy the key words in their notebooks at home, then I'll mark in the next class.*

Teacher Tu: *I don't mark textbooks, only notebooks. Many students use old textbooks from students of previous years.*

Leader Quyen: *Those who use 'Let's Go' may have enough time for students to copy and teachers may have some time to relax. If you teach MOET's new materials, no second, no minute to breathe. ... Now let's move to other parts, introducing the pattern?*

(Meeting B1 - 13/01/2013)

The extract strongly supports that the PETs in meeting B1 were able to exchange their experience in managing their English language classrooms with the particularities of their primary school students.

In addition, analysis of the observational data shows that through the interactions among the PETs in the PLCs, teacher identities were likely to be constructed and reconstructed. As presented above, teachers Hanh and Nga hold their own image of

a good EFL lesson while interacting with each other. Likewise, it is apparent from the data that the image of *'having fun'* in an English language lesson was highlighted by different teachers across the meetings when reflecting or giving feedback on the demonstrations, as well as sharing their concerns with the community. In the demonstration lesson in meeting B1, teacher Hanh asked her students to match furniture with its room as described in the recording. When teacher Tu commented: *'In Hanh's production activity, the arrangement of the room was not logical. A bathtub was put in a living room. No.'*, demonstration teacher Hanh gave a quick response: *'That's a funny, funny house. To challenge my students [laughs], a bed in the toilet [laughs]'* (Meeting B1 - 13/01/2013). She seemed to be very clear and confident of what and how she taught in order to make her students' learning more enjoyable. The other PETs in the meeting then supported teacher Hanh on having 'a funny house', laughing and nodding their heads to show their agreement. Another extract from meeting D2 illustrated how the PETs perceived the significance of arousing students' interest through language games:

Teacher Nhi: *....and in the game, I thought that teachers ... should declare which team ...after counting their scoreswon, we should have them applause. You just had all students clap.*

Other teachers: *[at the same time] You meant all students won, didn't you?*

Teacher Phuong: *One group? They might be sad. I want all students to feel equal.*

Other teachers: *[at the same time] creating a friendly environment, just for fun ... only motivating students as they were a bit quiet.*

(Meeting D2, 29/11/2013)

Teacher Phuong's utterance *'I want all students to feel equal'* gave a clear rationale for her decision of not declaring the winner in a language game. It seems that teacher Phuong was trying to deliver to her students a message that all of them deserved applause for their active engagement in the language game. She therefore shared with the other PETs in meeting D1 her notion of the benefits of an enjoyable and uncompetitive learning environment. Through that reflective

dialogue, an image of an enjoyable and motivating EFL lesson was collaboratively articulated.

The above-mentioned findings suggest that in the PLCs, the PETs were not 'functioning as isolated individuals, [but engaged in critical negotiations of meaning with those] who share their personal and professional space' (Kumaravadivelu 2012, p. 59) upon choosing and forming their self-image of an orderly or enjoyable EFL lesson for primary school students. However, it seems that such critical negotiations of meaning or collective discourses among the PETs occurred only with the moderation of the PLCs' leaders or the EFL consultant (see Chapter 5). Whenever this happened, those 'collective discourses' in the PLCs helped shape the PETs' personal world (Sfard & Prusak 2005). Each teacher developed his or her own way of interpreting their students' learning and opting for certain strategies of motivating their students even when interacting professionally with each other.

Generally, a culture of collaborative inquiry among the PETs in the PLCs was established although it is clear that this required the facilitation of the PLCs' leaders and/or EFL consultant (see Chapter 5). Whenever professional interactions occurred among the PETs, the PLCs created space for socially situated and inquiry-based learning, which reflects the premise of a sociocultural perspective on teacher learning (Johnson 2009). The demonstration teachers learned when preparing their demonstrations by being scaffolded by the more capable teachers. In addition, as PETs engaged in reflective dialogues on critical incidents from the demonstration lesson, they brought to the PLCs their diverse insight and perspectives on TEYL. They challenged and supported each other, which enabled them to articulate their critical thoughts about teaching and therefore grow professionally (Farrell 2008). As a result, they were likely to develop their procedural and personal knowledge of TEYL and to construct and reconstruct their professional identities as PETs.

6.2.2.2 *Interactions with the 'experts':*

The PLCs involved the participation of the PETs, the PLCs' leaders and the EFL consultant if he was present. In addition to the interaction with the other PETs, the

teacher learners learned by interacting with the PLCs' leaders and the EFL consultant as the experts in the field of teaching English language to younger learners and the leader from the Department of Education and Training (DOET).

With the PLCs' leaders

As presented in Chapter 5, the PLCs' leaders were involved in the PLCs as formal leaders to facilitate the PLCs' activities, which allowed for the PETs' learning opportunities. In this section, I provide an in-depth analysis of how the leaders exercised their expertise and experience in TEYL to promote the PETs' learning in the PLCs.

Being appointed by the DOET, the PLCs' leaders are usually experienced and insightful in teaching English language at primary schools (see Chapter 5). As an insider in the research site, I learned that the leaders of the PLCs A, B, and C were regarded as the senior PETs of the city and worked as co-examiners of the DOET. They had more opportunities to attend national workshops on TEYL and joined the assessment board of the DOET to observe for an annual assessment of the PETs' teaching at primary schools. Therefore, these leaders could be considered experts in TEYL while the leader of the PLC-D was not. As can be seen from the observational data, the PETs interacted with the PLCs' leaders for their insight and experience in the TEYL field more often in the three PLCs A, B and C than in the PLC-D. The findings of how the PETs in the three PLCs learned through their interactions with their leaders are analysed in the following section.

Data clearly show that the PETs' learning in the PLCs was facilitated by the leaders' 'strategic mediation' (Wertsch 1985, cited in Johnson 2009, p. 20). With the insight and experience of a PET, the PLCs' leaders were aware of the 'critical incidents' (Richards & Farrell 2005, p. 113) in the demonstrations from which the PETs were able to learn. The leaders strategically led the teachers' discussions or feedback to focus on those incidents.

Before having the teachers demonstrate language games (in meeting A3), leader Xuan of PLC-A asked the PETs to discuss the advantages of using language games.

Leader Xuan: *Before having some games demonstrated, I think we had better discuss some advantages of using games in an English lesson.*

Teacher Nam (T. Nam): *Listen and draw*

Leader Xuan: *I think we conduct games at the beginning of the lesson.*

T. Ha: *Warm-up*

T. Oanh: *warm up and ... in the part of revision.*

Leader Xuan: *Yes, in consolidation, or further practice.*

(Meeting A3 - 02/01/2014)

Followed this short dialogue was a demonstration of a game called 'Shark Attack'. After the demonstration, leader Xuan continued sharing her insight in using language games: *'I want to remind you this point. What's the purpose of the warm-up? Only for fun? Only in 5 minutes. The game shouldn't be challenging. Only for fun, to raise a fun atmosphere.'* Engaging in that professional exchange, the PETs did not only see how different games were conducted, but were also able to stimulate their schemata or develop their understanding of using language games in teaching English language.

It is also apparent from the data that the leaders seemed to have a more critical view on the teaching behaviours in the demonstration thanks to their experience and insight in TEYL. This was illustrated in the following extract from meeting B1 when leader Quyen skillfully led the discussion to the issue of involving more students in a language game, called *Slap the board* (British Council n.d.):

Leader Quyen: *[in English] And how about the game 'Slap the board'? What's your idea? You, please. [point to one teacher; no response]. Maybe you? No idea? You can speak in Vietnamese if you don't feel confident to speak English.*

Teacher Trang: *the game is very good. It's good to use the picture to introduce the lesson. It's good for students to see the pictures first and understand.... [switching to Vietnamese]. Like using the picture to lead students to the game.*

[Other teachers also contributed some ideas at the same time, although not clear, uttering: using the picture...]

Leader Quyen *[in English]*: *The game 'Slap the board'. All of you know the game 'slap the board', but I think it's only six pupils play and take part in the game. It's not good for the rest of the class. How (sic) can we do to involve all the students to take part in the game, yeah... so that all students have chance to practise the words, vocab? How, how can we change the game 'Slap the board'?*

... [Teachers and leader shared their strategies of involving the whole class in playing the game Slap the Board]

(Meeting B1 - 13/01/2013)

It was found from this extract and the other meetings of the PLC-B that being an experienced and insightful PET and a co-examiner of the DOET, leader Quyen was aware of the common mistake that PETs usually made in their teaching. That was, involving only a small number of students in playing language games in their English lessons, which leader Quyen also found in the demonstration lesson B1. In the above interaction, leader Quyen acted as a facilitative mentor that the teacher trainers in the Smith and Lewis's (2015) study worked towards. Her questions *'How about the game Slap the Board?' and 'How [What] can we do to involve all the students to take part in the game?'* worked as a 'springboard' strategy (Smith & Lewis 2015, p. 146) to stimulate the PETs' professional sharing in order to resolve their common mistake in conducting language games. The finding suggests that the PETs in the meeting found it significant to discuss the issue of involving students in language games raised by leader Quyen and actively engaged in the discussion. They shared different strategies of involving their students in the game *Slap the Board*. Teacher Tu said: *'Yeah, game 'slap the board' only involved 5 or 6 students. In class, I normally have them work in pairs. Competition is not necessary. To involve all students, I let them slap the pictures on the table. I prepare pictures for each pair.'* Following teacher Tu's sharing, teacher Nga added: *'I used this game with my students. I had all of them slap their book. Teacher says 'a book', students slap. Those who slap correctly shout 'Yeah'. Students are not deceiving, very honest, and checked*

each other.' (Meeting B1 - 13/01/2013). These sharings could be then adopted by the other PETs in that meeting. Teacher Trang, a novice PET and a new comer to PLC-B, acknowledged that she had successfully 'copied' the idea of involving all the students in playing language games in her English lessons.

In addition, analysis of the observational and interview data shows that both the PETs and the three PLCs' leaders perceived the leader's role as an advisor in the PLCs. Many of the PETs turned to the PLCs' leaders for advice in dealing with particular issues in teaching. They tended to listen attentively to what the PLCs' leaders shared in the discussions. In my interviews, the leaders acknowledged that they must share their insight and experience in TEYL with the PETs in the PLCs. This tendency was clearly seen in the discussion sections, particularly in those of the PLC-C. The leader of PLC-C, Ms Thi, usually gave her final remarks to conclude what had been discussed among the PETs. She sometimes responded to any of the PETs' concerns that had not been discussed in depth. For example, in meeting C3, leader Thi suggested that teachers should not explain the grammar rule of an English structure to Year 2 students as they learned mainly by imitation. This indicates that the PLCs' leaders provided the PETs with 'scaffolding' interpretation (Lave & Wenger 1991) of what was to be learned from the demonstration in the light of theories in ELT and TEYL. The PETs' professional learning was therefore mediated within the zone of proximal development (Johnson & Golombek 2003; Lantolf 2000) through the social interactions between the PETs and the leaders as the experts.

In short, the PLCs' leaders strategically mediated the PETs' learning through their interactions, which mainly occurred in the discussion sections. With their insight and experience in TEYL, the leaders guided the PETs' learning towards significant issues in ELT and TEYL. By the same token, the leaders scaffolded the PETs to interpret their teaching practice with the use of theories in ELT and TEYL.

With the EFL consultant:

The EFL consultant, Mr Kim, was considered an expert with an up-to-date insight into the field of TEYL in Thanh Van, and as a leader from the DOET supervising and evaluating the English learning and teaching activities of the PETs in the city (see

Chapter 4). Therefore, it is understandable that Mr Kim brought his expertise and authoritative voice to the PLCs' meetings when he attended, and the PETs hoped and expected that he would attend. It was found that he usually delayed his feedback or contributions until the end of the meetings when most of the PETs' ideas or concerns had been raised. Following is the analysis of how the EFL consultant interacted with the PETs as an advisor and an authority from the DOET to enhance their professional learning in the PLCs.

As an advisor

The findings show that with his insight in the TEYL field, which was regularly updated with workshops or training courses, the EFL consultant acted as an advisor to give feedback on both the strengths and shortcomings of the demonstrations. First, the EFL consultant gave his compliments on the general aspects of the demonstrations or demonstration teachers. For example, he praised demonstration teacher Mai (in meeting A1) who had prepared good visual aids and successfully created a communicative environment in her classroom. The examples of his compliments to other demonstration teachers on their lessons were: *'The teacher prepared the lesson very carefully. The lesson was engaging and motivating with excellent use of technology. Students are very active.'* (given to teacher Cuc – Meeting C2) or *'Interactions between teacher and students were very effective, all was in harmony. This can tell us that the teacher has been very devoted in her teaching. Teaching or learning is a process.'* (given to teacher Phuong – Meeting D2).

The consultant also critically analysed the shortcomings of the demonstrations. These may or may not have been discussed among the PETs. It is clear from the findings that the EFL consultant usually drew on the theory of ELT to help the PETs understand the underlying principles of their teaching behaviours. For instance, in meeting A1, the consultant explained that primary school students learn better with modeling and practice than with explanation. He advised: *'When teacher wants to correct students' pronunciation mistakes, for example, students don't pronounce the ending sound /s/ or /z/ in plural forms, teacher should model and have them repeat. Don't just tell them: 'You should remember to say the sound /s/'. Where's the sound /s/?'* (Meeting A1 - 24/01/2013). In meeting C1, the principle of

giving short and simple instruction to students was given as the rationale for Mr Kim's feedback on teacher Ly's instruction. In this way, the EFL consultant mediated the PETs' professional learning through the use of scientific concepts and everyday concepts (Johnson & Golombek 2011) of teaching and learning English language in general and to younger learners in particular.

In addition, the observational data show that the EFL consultant often advised the teachers to make their English language teaching more accessible to their students by taking into account the particularities of their teaching practice. In meeting C1, the EFL consultant suggested using a Vietnamese equivalent, which needed to be understandable to the primary school students when explaining the meaning of English words, particularly abstract ones. Specifically, he suggested that the term 'tình yêu thương' be used as the Vietnamese equivalent to the abstract word 'love' used in a family context. In a similar vein, in meeting B2, Mr Kim explained why demonstration teacher Hong was not successful in involving her students in a group-work activity at the end of her lesson. He explained: *'As the classroom setting in Vietnamese schools is not suitable for students to work in groups. First, the number of students is too big. Second, desks and benches in each classroom are attached, so it is not easy for students to mingle around to work in groups. The teacher should consider whether groupwork is efficient or may be time-consuming or just like a show.'* (Meeting B2 - 04/12/2013)

The findings suggest that upon critically analysing the underlying reasons for the shortcomings of the demonstrations, the EFL consultant successfully drew on the principles of practicality and particularity in language teaching (Kumaravadivelu 2006) in mediating the PETs' learning. The teachers would thereby be aware of taking into account the particularities of primary school students, having limited knowledge of Vietnamese vocabulary, and their specific teaching conditions, class size and facilities in appropriating their teaching methods. By doing this, they were likely to develop their personal knowledge of teaching EFL to a particular group of primary school students in a particular situation.

Generally, the EFL consultant interacted with the PETs from the perspective of an advisor. He drew on ELT and TEYL theories and the particularities of teaching

conditions in order to help the PETs understand the underlying rationale of their teaching performance. As a result, the teachers developed professional, procedural and personal knowledge of TEYL (Kumaravadivelu 2012).

As an authority

As explained in Chapter 5, the relationship between the PETs and the EFL consultant was hierarchical. That is the power relationship between teachers and an authority from the DOET, who supervises and evaluates their English language learning and teaching activities at primary schools in Thanh Van. The EFL consultant's ideas were considered 'direct advice' on how the PETs should act in their EFL teaching at primary schools. In this section, I draw on more detailed findings of how the power relationship was exercised to enhance the PETs' learning.

Analysis of the data shows that the PETs in the PLCs expected a remedy for their concerns in EFL teaching from the EFL consultant. As discussed in Chapter 5, both the PLCs' leaders and PETs valued the presence of the EFL consultant in the PLCs' meetings and his authoritative voice on guiding what and how to teach EFL to their primary school students. In the discussion sections when he was not present, the PETs regularly insisted that they had better teach in the way that the consultant expected them to. In the meetings where he was present, the PETs tended to rely on the EFL consultant to comment on the issues that they could not solve in their community. For instance, in meeting D2, one teacher turned to the EFL consultant for his advice on their issue of whether new words should be presented to students before having them read a short English story. The teachers in the PLC-D could not reach an agreement on this issue in their previous meetings when the consultant was not present. The teacher asked the consultant:

'Taking this opportunity, I'd like to ask Mr [Kim] about the story lesson we [teachers] last observed? In the previous meeting (of the PLC-D), teacher Huong taught a story lesson. That story had some new words, we wonder whether we should pre-teach the new words? In our PLC, some said yes, some said no. Today, you're here, could I ask what your advice is?'

(Meeting D2– 29/11/2013)

Being an insightful and experienced PET, leader Quyen of the PLC-B also turned to the EFL consultant for his advice on the issue of whether pre-teaching new words in a reading lesson. Leader Quyen asked:

'I've tried not to pre-teach new words to students [before reading a text]. Traditionally, we did.... I want to change, not pre-teaching vocabulary. I had my students read the text for comprehension first, doing tasks, and finally checking, matching new words with their Vietnamese equivalents, for example. ...I found it work well. My students were able to do [matching]. Mr [Kim], what do you think about that? I did, but am not sure if that new method is accepted.'

(Meeting B2, 04/12/2013)

The findings suggest that participating in the PLCs, the PETs still expected to receive authoritative advice from the EFL consultant on how they should teach in their own English classroom. Put simply, the EFL consultant's voice seemed to weigh heavily in shaping the PETs' English language teaching.

From his own point of view, the EFL consultant was aware of the power of his authoritative voice as a leader from the Department. It is clear from the observational data that in the PLCs' meetings, the EFL consultant usually refused to give a clear-cut answer to the questions of whether an activity is effective or what sequence is good to follow.

In response to leader Quyen's concern of pre-teaching new words, the consultant said:

'From my perspective as a consultant, teachers can teach in any ways in which their students can understand and learn. Pre-teaching vocabulary or not doesn't matter, providing that students can learn, teachers can obtain the objectives of the lesson.'

(Meeting B2, 04/12/2013)

In addition, the EFL consultant advised the teachers to be flexible and creative in their teaching. He advised:

'... how to teach in your classroom, you should know that it depends on your students. That means there's no model lesson any longer... for all schools and all groups of students ... You must be flexible and creative in your teaching.'

(Meeting D2 – 29/11/2013)

As seen in the observations of the meetings, the EFL consultant consistently insisted on the roles that a primary school English language teacher needed to take. He insisted:

'You need to remember that by the end of a lesson, your students must learn some points, at least one point. Must identify the lesson's goal...'

(Meeting C1, 17/01/2013)

or

'I'd like to insist that teachers must arouse their students' interest. Students must be excited in their English lesson. Teachers have to make the best use of the allotted time in each lesson so that their students are able to practise English language the most.'

(Meeting A2 – 07/11/2013)

These findings indicate that the consultant tended to take up his authority and used strong modal verbs including 'nên' (should), 'phải' (must / have to), or 'cần' (need to) in most of his direct advice given to the teachers in different meetings. As discussed in Chapter 5, power relationships that existed in the interactions between the PETs and the EFL consultant were affected by cultural expectations embedded in the hierarchical system of Vietnam (Hofstede, Hofstede & Minkov 2010). Parents, teachers or leaders in Vietnamese society are culturally respected by their children, students or followers (Hofstede 2011). This cultural expectation might have influenced the way that the EFL consultant in the PLCs used his authority of being a leader from the Department in mediating teachers' learning. While insisting on the significance of teachers' sense of plausibility, being eclectic or flexible, he tried to develop the PETs' professional identity by setting up a

picture of what a good English language lesson was like, being goal-oriented, interactive or enjoyable or what roles a primary school English language teacher needed to take, arousing students' interest or engaging students.

However, in analysing the observational and interview data, it was found that while exercising his authority in giving direct advice to PETs, the EFL consultant himself was not comfortable with the new perspective that there is no model lesson and teachers are eclectic. He had not completely changed his perspective of a good English language lesson or teacher. He shared:

'Frankly speaking, after participating in MOET's workshops, I got confused in my role of a consultant. We've been so long familiar to the teaching methods proposed in the ELTTP [English Language Teacher Training Project] project by British Council. We're suggested to follow specific steps in teaching skills, structure or vocabulary. In the MOET's workshops on new textbooks, we're advised to follow the sequence in the textbooks. If there's a section Look, Listen and Repeat, teachers just have students look, listen and repeat, not pre-teaching vocabulary or structure.... Back to our province, the experts from the Department advised that teachers needed to be flexible and creative. What and how to teach is depending on each student group. In fact, at this stage, giving directive advice on teaching and learning English, I feel ... not sure how to ... Now, just do what MOET suggested.'

(Meeting D2 – 29/11/2013)

The EFL consultant shared the same feeling in other PLC's meetings that he was confused about the MOET's advice that there were no model lessons or no clear steps of an English lesson for all and the experts from the Department that teachers needed to be flexible and creative. He also admitted that it was difficult for him as an advisor from the Department to hold this new perspective because there was not a clear framework of seeing a good English language lesson as he was used to. Being imposed by the MOET with a more powerful voice, the EFL consultant was then trying to pass on this new perspective to the PETs in the PLCs.

The PETs may not have developed their image of a good English language lesson or a good PET with a sense of plausibility or eclecticism as the EFL consultant advised. Being a teacher trainer at the university in Thanh Van, from where most of the PETs graduated, I understand well that the PETs were trained to use a model sequence and techniques of teaching an English lesson on different topics in their pre-service teacher training programs. When teaching, they are expected to follow that model and are judged whether they follow the model and make little change to this way of teaching. Analysis of the observational data shows that the EFL consultant was consistent in his direct advice on developing teachers' eclecticism, even though the PETs kept asking him for solutions or the best method over different meetings, and expected that they would be following a standard model in their English language lessons. It is understandable that the PETs had not adopted the perspective of being eclectic and flexible teachers that the EFL consultant had advised them over a number of the PLCs' meetings. Their professional identity cannot be imposed by others; its development 'involves the construction and reconstruction of meaning through stories over time' (Rodgers & Scott 2008, p. 733). It was the social interactions in the PLCs between the PETs and the EFL consultant that helped the PETs to be aware of their sense of plausibility, but they needed more time and teaching practice for that sense to develop naturally.

In short, the PETs were able to learn through their social interactions with the PLCs' leaders and the EFL consultant. In the PLCs, the leaders of the PLCs (A, B and C) and the EFL consultant were considered the experts in the field of TEYL. Taking up their insights, these experts drew on scientific concepts or theories of TEYL to create 'a strong link between theory and practice' in the PETs' learning, which is the target of a transformative model of professional learning (Fraser et al. 2007, p. 159). The PETs were able to understand the underlying principles of their teaching behaviours or to internalise the theories of TEYL embedded in critical incidents from the demonstrations and their teaching practice, which may result in transformations in their knowledge, beliefs and teaching performance. On the other hand, the PETs looked forward to authoritative advice from the EFL consultant on the best methods in teaching EFL at primary school, but this was not often provided. Without giving a remedy or authoritative voice on how the PETs

should teach, the EFL consultant used his authority to request the PETs to develop their sense of plausibility.

Generally, the PLCs allowed for the PETs' learning through the activities conducted in each meeting. The PETs learned by critically reflecting on what they did, saw and heard in the PLCs and in their previous teachings. Notably, social interactions among the peer PETs, the PLCs' leaders and the EFL consultant mediated the PETs' learning in the light of theories of ELT and TEYL. The power of expertise and authority seemed to weigh much in shaping what the PETs learned to teach.

6.3 Participants' voices about the professional learning communities

As presented in the previous section, the professional learning communities (PLCs) created different learning opportunities for the PETs who learned by reflecting and through social interactions. It was significant to understand what the stakeholders, namely the EFL consultant, the PLCs' leaders and the PETs, thought about the PLCs' affordances for the PETs' professional learning. Accommodating the data collected from PLCs' observations and interviews with the stakeholders, this section presents a critical analysis of their voices.

6.3.1 The EFL consultant's voice

It was important to understand the importance of the EFL consultant's voice on the impact of the PLCs in the PETs' professional learning process. The EFL consultant supervises and examines the English language learning and teaching activities at primary schools in Thanh Van and has been facilitating the PLCs' activities since the first day of their implementation in 2008 (see Chapters 2 and 4).

Holding the perspective of a leader from the Department of Education and Training (DOET) in the city, the EFL consultant was very positive about the PLCs' benefits to the PETs' professional growth. As noted in Chapter 5, he always highlighted valuable learning opportunities that the PLCs were likely to bring to the PETs and encouraged the PETs to exchange their experience and challenges in the PLCs. Being asked about the impacts of the PLCs on the PETs' growth from the

perspective of an examiner, the EFL consultant responded with a determined voice:

'They [the teachers' teaching skills] remarkably improved, definitely, you know. It's certain that they improved much and have become more skillful. As you know, in the past years, some teachers didn't know how to teach ... for example, didn't know how to teach new vocabulary. Or they didn't know how to design a lesson suitable for primary students. Over the last years, with the PLCs' activities, I realised that the teachers' skills have definitely improved, and even the teachers themselves found them [the PLCs] helpful. They were also aware of their progress after each time participating in the PLCs' meeting.'

(Interview, 28/01/2013)

This indicates that the consultant had a very positive attitude towards the influences that the PLCs exerted on the practice of English language teaching and learning at primary schools in Thanh Van. He confirmed that the PETs' teaching skills had definitely improved and that the PETs were aware of the benefits for their learning in the PLCs.

6.3.2 The PLCs' leaders' voices

The leaders of the three PLCs A, B and C shared their voices on the PLCs' operations as learning sites for the PETs from different perspectives. They each acted as an organiser and a moderator facilitating their PLC's activities, and as senior PETs learning to teach. They also brought their perspective as a co-examiner of the Department (see Chapters 4 and 5).

From the perspectives of an organiser and a moderator, the PLCs' leaders claimed that the PLCs' activities were always interesting to the PETs and helpful to their professional growth. The PLC-A's leader, Ms Xuan, shared the PETs' eagerness in attending the PLCs' activities as follows:

'The teachers in my community like the PLCs' activities very much. Learning many schools I was very moved. When invited to attend the PLC's

meeting, they were very delighted, especially those from remote schools. I find that their attitudes ... clearly willing...'

(Interview, 05/02/2013)

Ms Xuan continued to explain that the teachers preferred participating in the PLCs' meetings to the workshops held by the Department, which were usually crowded and less practical. Many of the workshops were conducted by publishers with a main goal of introducing their new textbooks or presumably of encouraging schools to buy their books. The PETs complained that they did not learn much from these kinds of formal professional development activities. This is pertinent to what has been found in previous studies on in-service teacher professional development programs in different parts of Vietnam (Hanamo 2008; Hayes 2008a; Nguyen 2011).

Analysis of the interview data indicates that the three leaders drew on more specific impacts that the PLCs exerted on the PETs' professional growth, from the perspectives of PETs and the examiners of the Department. These leaders taught EFL at primary schools in the city, just like the other PETs in the PLCs, and worked as co-examiners of the DOET for periodical assessment of the PETs' EFL teaching. They therefore had a good understanding of the PET's learning experience in the PLCs and the practice of EFL teaching at primary schools. These leaders acknowledged that the PETs had grown remarkably in terms of knowledge and skills of TEYL thanks to their participation in the PLCs' activities. This is similar to what the EFL consultant shared about the benefits of the PLCs on the PETs' development as noted in the previous section. To be more specific, the PLC-C's leader, Ms Thi, said:

'... many teachers ... generally in my community, I found that they learned from each other, they know how to use some teaching techniques upon returning to their teaching... I realised that through participating in the PLCs' activities, they know more. ... I think that attending different PLCs' meetings, the teachers can learn at least one thing. For example, when teaching, instead of lengthy explanation, the teacher only demonstrates, gives short and simple

instructions, or uses gestures, and the other teachers can learn [these strategies].'

(Interview, 20/02/2013)

According to Ms Thi, the PLCs allowed the PETs to learn by observing the demonstrations. This kind of learning seemed to be similar to what Edge (2011) called 'copying to be understood' (p. 51). The PETs learned by copying the demonstration teachers' 'short and simple instructions' or 'gestures'. In fact, their copying to learn was not done so blindly, but understood in the light of ELT theories and the analysis of the teaching context through their social interactions with peers and the experts (see Section 6.2 above). Leader Thi also explained that the extent to which the PETs were able to learn from observing the others lay within each individual teacher's intuition. Observing the same demonstration and engaging in the same discussion section, one teacher may take a different viewpoint from another teacher. The PLCs thereby allowed for the PETs' self-directed learning.

In a similar vein, the PLC-B's leader, Ms Quyen, was also very positive about the value of the community voice for the PETs' professional growth. In my interview, Ms Quyen explained that after observing a demonstration lesson, the teachers in the community gave feedback and discussed what should and should not be done, from which the PETs, particularly the less experienced, were able to learn from each other and improved notably.

In general, for the EFL consultant and the PLCs' leaders, the PLCs attained the target aimed for by professional learning opportunities (Timperley & Alton-Lee 2008). That is, to improve the PETs' teaching knowledge and skills, which could possibly lead to changes in their teaching practice. From the perspective of the leaders who observed and evaluated the PETs' teaching, both the EFL consultant and the PLCs' leaders acknowledged that the PLCs allowed for the PETs' learning and led to the improvement of the teachers' knowledge and teaching skills.

6.3.3 The teachers' voices

The previous sections presented the analysis of the EFL consultant and the PLCs' leaders' positive attitudes to the PLCs' influence on the PETs' professional growth. This section continues with a more detailed account of how the PETs, the insiders of their learning process, talked about their own learning experience in the PLCs. The findings show that the PETs benefited from the PLCs' activities, but each of them had his or her own approach to taking that learning advantage. A number of challenges to learning in the PLCs were also reported.

6.3.3.1 Positive experience

The findings show that the PETs' attitudes to their learning in the PLCs were varied depending on their experience with the PLCs. Among the seven PETs interviewed in this study, three PETs including teachers Thanh, Trang and Dung had less experience in teaching EFL at primary school and therefore attended fewer PLCs' activities than the others, including teachers Nga, Thuy, Lai and Anh, who had been teaching EFL at primary school and attended the PLCs' activities for more than five years (see Table 4.4). These two groups of teachers were likely to have different ways of recalling their learning experience in the PLCs.

For the less experienced PETs (teacher Thanh, Dung and Trang), the PLCs were a valuable learning site where they could learn from the other PETs, particularly from the more experienced. Being new to their school community and to their profession, the novice teachers all had a strong desire in learning to teach, but their learning opportunities were not always available inside and outside their school. Teacher Thanh (PLC-A) said:

'...I didn't know how teach when first teaching English to primary school students. I didn't have anyone to learn with ... It was lucky to have the PLCs ... one meeting every two or three months, and then I had opportunity to observe the others.'

(Interview 1, 01/02/2013)

Teachers Trang (PLC-B) and Dung (PLC-D) shared a similar positive experience of the PLCs. Starting their teaching at primary schools one semester before I was at

the research site to collect data, teacher Trang and teacher Dung attended their PLCs' meeting for the first time when I started to observe the PLCs' activities (meetings B1 and D1 respectively).

Being asked about her professional learning experience, teacher Dung (PLC-D) confided:

'starting my teaching job at this school, no one provided me with any professional support that I could learn from. ... , mainly I learned from the PLC's meetings, once last year and twice this year.'

(Interview 2, 05/12/2013)

From the interview data, it is clear that these novice teachers relied on the PLCs as the only learning site where they were able to see the others' teaching, hear them, talk about their EFL teaching and share their concerns (though at a limited level). They showed their eagerness and desire to participate and learn in the PLCs. Teacher Trang even wrote to me in a personal email to share her disappointment when two of the PLC-B's planned meetings were cancelled (see Table 5.1) as she had too few opportunities to learn from colleagues at her school.

In addition, with a strong voice, these PETs showed their definite agreement on the benefits of the PLCs to their learning process. These young PETs recalled specific skills of managing their English language classrooms that they had learned from the PLCs' activities. They acknowledged that by observing and listening to the other PETs in the PLCs' meetings, the sequence or steps of presenting new words, or new structures that they had learned in their pre-service teacher training programs at university became clearer. Other examples of teaching strategies these PETs learned from the PLCs included visualising the meaning of a new word or the reading content (teacher Thanh), balancing English and Vietnamese languages in giving instruction (teacher Dung) or involving more students in language games (teacher Trang). They explained that they had tried these techniques and strategies in their teaching, which was apparent when I observed their English language lessons at primary schools.

In a similar vein, the more experienced teachers (teachers Nga, Thuy, Lai and Anh) highly appreciated their learning experience in the PLCs and were willing to participate in the PLCs' activities. However, they seemed to perceive the benefits of their learning experience in the PLCs in a more general way. These PETs were aware of the PLCs' goal that the DOET aimed at when developing the PLCs. That is, the PLCs are to develop as learning sites to bring PETs from different primary schools across the city to learn from each other. They all acknowledged that they were able to learn some techniques and games that the demonstration teachers used, but did not recall the specific skill of managing their English language classrooms as the less experienced PETs did. Furthermore, it is apparent from the findings that these PETs had a shared view that they learned from the mistakes that the demonstration teachers made in their teachings. Teacher Thuy critically analysed that the demonstration lesson C1 was not successful as its general goal and the specific objectives of the activities were not clearly defined and therefore, the lesson did not have a logical flow of activities. She explained that after observing the lesson, she always tried to avoid these shortcomings in designing and delivering her EFL lessons. In my interview with teacher Anh after I observed her lesson, she admitted: *'I learned from teacher Ly's mistake [meeting C1 – 17/01/2013] in explaining the meaning of an abstract word 'love'. In this lesson, I used pictures and gestures to visualise the meaning of the word 'happy'. (Interview 2 – 29/11/2013).* In a similar manner, teacher Lai constructed their image of a friendly PET after seeing the demonstration teacher Cuc (in meeting C2) interacting with her students in an empathic voice.

Further talking about the benefits of the PLCs, teacher Thuy added:

'We have many difficulties in teaching, we don't wait until that day [of PLCs' meeting] to exchange experience with the others. But we share with the others year after year. We work with them, to share sample tests, to share ideas, to share something ...Generally, about social networking, it's [PLC] so perfect.'

(Interview 2, 03/12/2013)

The benefit of creating a social network among the PETs was highlighted by teacher Thuy, but not by the other interviewed PETs. The other PETs might not

have been aware of this social function of PLCs or were not good at developing social relationships due to their shy personality (teacher Thanh) or their peripheral participation (teacher Anh) (see Chapter 5). This accords with how the PLC-C's leader talked about distinctive lessons that each PET could pick up from the PLCs' activities (see Section 6.3.2). The PLCs allowed for a social and collective endeavor of teacher learning, but their benefits were taken up differently by individual PET learners.

6.3.3.2 Negative experience

On the other hand, some of the PETs, as the insiders of their learning process, reported a number of negative experiences in the PLCs, which were mainly related to the implementation of the PLCs' activities. Firstly, the interviewed PETs found that the frequency of the meetings in each PLC was too low, and did not cater for their learning needs. In analysing the interviews with the PETs, it was found that some of them doubted the possibility that they were able to learn from what they saw in the demonstration lessons in the PLCs. As a new member to both the community and the teaching profession, teacher Trang (PLC-B) argued: *'If all schools used the same textbook, we could learn more. I suggest demonstrations should be taught to students with a low-level [of English]. Teaching high-level students, ... in reality, over-rehearsed demonstrations are different from reality. Not helpful at all.'* (Interview 1, 17/01/2013). Being more critical, teacher Thuy (PLC-C) commented about the over-rehearsed nature of the demonstration lesson in meeting C2:

'The lesson was too perfect, too much prepared...only for demonstration. Every section went very smoothly. Impossible! Students responded fluently to any of the teacher's questions. The students were 'frozen'. They dared not answer incorrectly and pretended to be good students. No real problems. Both teachers and students were 'frozen'.'

(Interview 2, 03/12/2013)

The PETs' sharing on the faultlessness of one demonstration lesson delivered by the PETs in the PLCs raised two major issues relating to teacher professional

learning. The first issue lies in how the PETs could learn most by observing each other, which was one commonly preferred activity in the PLCs (see Appendix A). It is understandable that an observed class is definitely different from an unobserved one. Regardless of whether they were informed of being observed, it is likely that both the teacher and students would behave differently from their regular lessons. They definitely would want to be the best in the others' eyes; hence, much preparation for their demonstration lessons was inevitable (see Section 6.2 above). Instead, the experience in observing the others gave the demonstration teachers and the other PETs in the PLCs an awareness of the value of learning from the real picture of a normal EFL classroom, and this raises the question of how to set up a preparation limit, which needs to be further discussed in the PLCs' meetings. The second issue underlying the PETs' claims on the faultlessness of the demonstrations is related to the notion of situatedness in professional learning. A situative perspective suggests that teaching and learning is contextually situated (Greeno 1997; Greeno, Collins & Resnick 1996, cited in Desimone 2009 and Putnam & Borko 2000; Lave & Wenger 1991). From this perspective, teacher knowledge construction is embedded in authentic activities that teachers do in their classrooms, and professional learning activities need to be directly related to teachers' day-to-day practice. One possible reason as to why some of the PETs treated the demonstration teachers' faultlessness as a weakness of the PLCs was that the PETs saw their situatedness as special. They therefore found what was offered in the demonstration lessons irrelevant or inapplicable to their particular situation because their school was different. These teachers would be 'quite pragmatic' in seeing that professional learning must relate directly to their specific school (Guskey 2002, p. 382). Also, Opfer & Pedder (2011) argued that rather than being thought of as a situated event, professional learning should be conceptualised as a complex system, involving 'many processes, mechanisms, actions and elements' (p. 378). The PETs need to 'consider recursively both general principles [reflected in the faultless demonstrations] and [their] specific contexts to learn' (p. 381). This accords with teachers' internalisation that teacher learning from a sociocultural perspective aims at.

As discussed above, the findings reveal that the PLCs' participants, the EFL consultant, PLCs' leaders and PETs generally had a positive attitude towards the PLCs as learning sites for the PETs in Thanh Van. The PETs were willing to participate in the PLCs' activities. From the perspectives of leaders and examiners, the PLCs' leaders and EFL consultant strongly agreed that the PETs' knowledge and teaching skills had remarkably developed thanks to the PLCs, which was then confirmed by the PETs as the insiders of the learning process. Additionally, the PLCs were also useful in developing professional relationships among the PETs, which helped expand the scope of the PLCs' collaborative professional learning beyond the border of the official meetings. On the other hand, the low frequency of the PLCs' meetings and the perfectness of the demonstrations in the PLCs were considered as hindrances to maximising the PLCs' efficiency in improving the PETs' knowledge and skills of TEYL.

6.4 Summary of the chapter

This chapter provides a detailed account of the PLCs' affordances in the learning process of the PETs across Thanh Van. Upon analysing the collected data, I bore in mind the assumptions on which this study was based. That is, teacher learning is contextualised; teacher knowledge is socially constructed and reconstructed, but unique to each individual teacher in a particular context; and professional learning is mediated. The data collected from two sources including observations of the PLCs' meetings and interviews with the stakeholders show that the PLCs supported the PETs' learning in various ways.

Firstly, through the PLCs' activities, the PETs were able to learn by reflecting on their teachings and by socially interacting with their peer teachers, leaders and EFL consultant. By these means, their learning in the PLCs was not only an individual endeavour that the PET performed, but also involved a collective endeavour of the other participants in the PLCs. Their knowledge was developed through self-reflections and reflective dialogues.

Secondly, the PLCs stimulated the PETs' internalisation, a signal of teacher cognitive development. Engaging in the 'socially mediated activities', namely demonstrations and discussions, the PETs moved to 'internal mediation' (Johnson

& Golombek 2003, p. 731) to have critical reflections on their teachings. Their reflections were either publicly shared in the community or kept as private learning sources for the observers. The PETs took into account the particular characteristics of their students and practicality of their teaching context in analysing the underlying rationale for their teaching actions and deciding what should be copied into their teaching. In other words, in the PLCs, the PETs were likely to construct their personal knowledge (Kumaravadivelu 2012) in relation to their particular teaching practice.

Thirdly, the community's voice or expertise in the PLCs was highly appreciated and exerted a marked impact on the PETs' knowledge development. Many of the PETs in the PLCs turned to their peers or the community for a solution to their issues, which resulted in the development of collaborative inquiry in the PLCs, albeit at a limited level. Furthermore, based on critical incidents in the demonstration lessons or the issues raised in the PLCs, the PETs discussed how to manage their EFL classrooms. By the same token, the PLCs' leaders and EFL consultant drew on their expertise in ELT and TEYL to enlighten the underlying principles of the incidents or issues. As a result, the PETs were likely to develop both their professional and procedural knowledge (Kumaravadivelu 2012) through their interactions with their peers and the experts.

Fourthly, the EFL consultant's authority seemed to weigh heavily in shaping the PETs' knowledge. From a more powerful position as a leader from the Department and an expert in the TEYL field, in this situation, it was culturally inevitable for the EFL consultant to exercise his power in mediating the PETs' learning. With the presence of the consultant in a number of the PLCs' meetings, the PETs expected his direct advice on or remedies for their issues, which had not been solved by the community. This tendency of learning is unavoidable in a hierarchical society such as Vietnam, where the teachers tend to rely greatly on their leaders (Hofstede, Hofstede & Minkov 2010).

Fifthly, the PET's professional identities were shaped and reshaped in the PLCs' activities. Upon observing the demonstration teachers, the PETs were able to see themselves as a PET and to identify what a good EFL lesson at primary school

looked like. Their EFL lessons need to be objective-oriented, interesting, engaging and accessible to their students. The image of a friendly PET was also developed. However, the PETs still worked towards a model or standard lesson to follow while the EFL consultant consistently advised the teachers to be flexible and creative in their teaching. It appeared that the PETs had not developed the image of a flexible or eclectic PET, which perhaps will naturally develop from the teachers' hands-on experience, rather than being imposed by the EFL consultant as an authority from the Department.

Finally, the PLCs' affordances for the PETs' professional growth were confirmed by the stakeholders' voices, namely the teachers, the PLCs' leaders and the EFL consultant, who engaged in the PLCs with different roles. They all believed that the PETs' knowledge and teaching skills had significantly improved thanks to their participation in the PLCs' activities. The value of developing professional networking outside the PLCs' meetings was also considered an advantage of the PLCs. However, to some extent, the PLCs did not always satisfy the teachers' learning needs due to the low frequency of meetings and the idealised nature of the demonstrations.

In general, the PLCs allowed for the PETs' learning, which was complex, uneven and occurred in ways that were not always accounted for in the literature. The next chapter discusses the significant issues which emerged from the findings in regard to the implementation of the PLCs and the PETs' learning process in the PLCs.

CHAPTER 7: Discussion

7.1 Introduction

This study seeks to answer two research questions:

1. *What are the features of professional learning communities in Thanh Van,?*
2. *In what ways do the professional learning communities support the learning process of the primary school English language teachers in that city?*

Multiple sources of data have been used to answer these two research questions; the data has been presented and analysed in the two findings chapters (5 and 6). I have identified three key issues related to the implementation of PLCs and teacher learning in the context of Thanh Van. These are: how the PLCs were reshaped or recontextualised to fit Thanh Van with its particular social, cultural and political features; how the social relationships among the participants were developed in the PLCs and affect the primary school English teachers' (PETs') learning; and how the PETs' professional learning was mediated in the PLCs. These three issues do not sit neatly in either Chapter 5 or Chapter 6, but across both findings chapters. Therefore, I will draw on different aspects of the findings presented in these two chapters when discussing the three key themes.

As stated in Chapter 3 – Literature Review, my study took a sociocultural perspective to examine how the teachers learned in their PLCs. Teacher learning is 'conceptualised as a long-term, complex and developmental process that is the result of participation in the social practices and contexts associated with learning and teaching' (Johnson 2009, p. 10). Holding to the premise of this perspective, I kept in mind three assumptions about teacher learning when conducting this study: professional learning is contextualised in its specific context; teacher knowledge is socially constructed but unique to each individual teacher in a particular context of teaching; and mediation promotes teacher's professional growth. Additionally, as an insider in the research setting, I also brought in my general understanding of the research context.

7.2 Recontextualisation of professional learning communities

Professional learning communities (PLCs) have been defined in different ways by educational researchers, and their success is judged according to different factors or characteristics. Thus, there is no universal definition or list of features that suits all the contexts of teacher learning. The review of literature revealed that the concept of PLCs originates from Britain, Australasia and North America (BANA countries) (e.g., DuFour 2004; Hargreaves 2007; Stoll 2011; Stoll & Louis 2007) and has been widely studied in these countries (e.g., Bolam et al. 2005; Harris & Jones 2010; Owen 2014; Vescio, Ross & Adams 2008). In the non-BANA countries, similar collaborative learning activities are described in different terms such as a *community of practice* of English language teachers in Turkey (Yildirim 2008) and China (Liu & Xu 2013); *teachers' community of enquiry* in Israel (Zellermayer & Tabak 2006); and an *in-school learning community* (Saito, Khong & Tsukui 2012; Saito & Tsukui 2008) or a *community of practice* (Cham 2013; Nguyen 2016) in Vietnam. These collaborative learning activities do not necessarily incorporate all of or any of the features of the PLCs originating from the BANA countries.

This study investigates an activity in Vietnam, known as *Sinh hoạt cụm chuyên môn*, which is literally translated into English as *Participating Professional Communities*. It was developed as a collaborative professional learning activity for teachers of English language at primary schools in Thanh Van (see Chapter 2 – Context - for further details). Considering the goal and the name of the activity, I adopted the term *Professional Learning Communities* (PLCs) from the literature (DuFour 2004; Stoll 2011; Stoll et al. 2006) as a label to describe this learning community (see Chapter 3 – Literature Review). Referring to the analysis of the findings on the PLCs' features presented in Chapter 5 and their affordances in professional learning presented in Chapter 6, I shall now discuss how these communities have been reshaped to suit the Vietnamese context.

7.2.1 The shared features

As discussed in Chapter 5, the PLCs that developed in the context of Thanh Van arose from their learners' needs, and promoted a culture of reflective and

collaborative inquiry, though collaboration developed at a limited rate. These are the significant features of any teacher community described in the literature reviewed for this study (Cassidy et al. 2008; DuFour 2004; Hargreaves 2007; Katz & Earl 2010; Stoll 2011). It is apparent that the PLCs operated as learning sites for the sake of their clientele in Thanh Van (Grossman, Wineburg & Woolworth 2001), namely the secondary school English language teachers who were learning how to teach EFL to primary school-aged students. This is the first and foremost feature of a PLC emphasised by various researchers (DuFour 2004; Hargreaves 2007; Stoll 2011). The PETs' shared goal of learning to teach helps distinguish the PLCs in the city from 'any [other] imaginable combinations or gatherings of teachers' (DuFour 2004, p. 1). In other words, the PETs came together to learn to teach from each other.

Furthermore, the findings clearly reveal that the PLCs in this study successfully aimed to promote a culture of reflective and collaborative inquiry among the PETs although the teachers' engagement needed to be facilitated by the leaders (this will be discussed in the next section). Reflective inquiry and collaboration are considered as the enablers for a successful PLC (Katz & Earl 2010; Stoll 2011) and for effective professional learning (Desimone et al. 2002; Guskey 2002; Veen, Zwart & Meirink 2012). As highlighted in Chapter 6, in the PLCs, the teacher learners were working as 'reflective practitioners' (Schön 1983) in collaboration with the other members to talk and think about critical incidents from their own teaching experiences. Their learning experience in the PLCs differed from how Vietnamese teachers usually learn in the traditional in-service teacher development programs (see Chapters 2 and 3). They were learning to become 'active and thinking decision-makers' about their teaching behaviours (Borg 2015, p. 1), which is not so much an individual endeavour, but a collective one.

In short, the PLCs in this study reflected the most significant features that any PLCs need to have. They succeeded in bringing the PETs with shared needs to learn by having them individually and collectively reflecting on their practices.

7.2.2 The unique features

Importantly, this study reveals that the PLCs had been recontextualised to meet the particularities of the PETs in their learning to teach EFL at primary school. In addition to the above-mentioned shared features, the PLCs incorporated a number of unique features, which were completely relevant to that particular context. Specifically, the PLCs were embedded within a formal structure; involved a high level of formal leadership, although its aim was to distribute leadership amongst the participants, particularly the teachers; and incorporated multi-layered relationships among participants. In this section, I will discuss how these unique features were exercised in order that the PLCs could operate as learning sites for the PETs in Thanh Van.

First, the findings presented in Chapter 5 show that the power of a formal structure was significant for the implementation of the PLCs in the city. The development and implementation of the PLCs were embedded within the supportive structures of hierarchical institutions, in which the PETs' teaching and professional learning were set up and took place. In this context, the hierarchical institutions include the Department of Education and Training (DOET) and primary schools. As an insider in the research setting, I understand that in this city, the DOET and primary schools supervise their teachers' teaching and learning activities. The PLCs' activities therefore needed to be officially approved by these institutions. Without their official approval, the teachers would not be allowed to leave their school duties to attend the PLCs' activities, which are usually carried out during school hours. Nor would the teachers be able to enter other primary schools to observe the demonstration lessons – a common activity in the PLCs. This finding implies that the required approval of the DOET and primary schools provides the PLCs with one of the external sources of power; that is, the control of 'institutional hierarchies' (Cassidy et al. 2008, p. 229) or with 'supportive structures' (Stoll 2011, p. 109), including time and space for the PETs' learning. As discussed in the literature (Aubusson, Ewing & Hoban 2009; Stoll 2011; Stoll et al. 2006), these formal supportive structures are an important resource for any successful PLC, but become more essential in the hierarchical Vietnamese society. Given this situation, the control of institutional hierarchies influences the decisions

made within each PLC (Bolam et al. 2005) on when, what and how the PETs can learn from each other. Before being implemented, the PLCs' planned activities needed approval from the Department, specifically the EFL consultant, and by the primary school where the activities took place.

Additionally, the study shows that the PLCs were reshaped to suit the setting of professional learning for Vietnamese teachers when they were established as a compulsory professional learning activity for all the PETs in the city. While the principle of voluntary participation in professional learning is an ideal for effective practice (Brookfield 1986) or a successful PLC (Hargreaves 2007) in certain contexts, the culture of professional development in Vietnam makes this particular form of participation unlikely. All the PETs were required to attend all the activities of their PLC, and their attendance was reported to the DOET as a record of their professional learning activities. As presented in Chapter 2 - Context, most of the PETs in Vietnam generally, and in the city particularly, have a heavy workload at primary schools. Most also do extra teaching at language centres after school hours to increase their income. As a result, the teachers are likely to be too tired and therefore reluctant to attend professional learning activities, even though they may have a strong learning desire. Nevertheless, the observational data show that the number of the PETs in the meetings was always high (see Appendix A). The EFL consultant made a reasonable argument that the teachers would definitely attend the PLCs' activities in spite of their heavy workload if they were asked to do so (see Chapter 5).

Furthermore, being established as an official and compulsory professional learning activity for the PETs in Thanh Van, the PLCs involved a high level of formal leadership by 'heroic leaders' (Camburn, Rowan & Taylor 2003, p. 348), namely the EFL consultant and the PLCs' leaders. As a leader from the DOET, the EFL consultant played a significant role as the facilitator by grouping the PETs from different schools together, inviting the relevant schools' official approval, and encouraging the PETs to participate in the PLCs' activities. Similarly, the PLCs' leaders exercised their formal leadership in organising the PLCs' activities and moderating the discussion (see Chapter 5). Such a high involvement of formal leaders seems to be contradictory to what is suggested in the literature about

distributing leadership across the participants in a PLC (Stoll 2011; Timperley & Parr 2009; Timperley 2005), but this form of organisation was appropriate to the particular context of the PLCs in this study. This study clearly suggests that formal leadership was a significant enabler to the successful implementation of official and obligatory activities of the PLCs across the city. It provided support against the institutional hierarchies of the DOET and schools that were sometimes considered as external constraints in implementing the PLCs' activities. It was reported that the school leaders did not allow their teachers to leave their school duties to attend the PLC's activities unless they received an official approval letter from the Department. Without the top-level management of these leaders, the PLCs would not have existed since 2008 and their activities might never have been implemented.

Analysis of the data clearly reveals that the recontextualisation of PLCs comes from the top-down leadership within the Department and schools. In spite of that formal leadership, the PLCs still involve a lot of bottom-up direction from the teachers themselves. As discussed in Chapters 5 and 6, the PETs were involved in the PLCs as active and thoughtful learners in their learning process (see Section 7.4 for further discussion). They were actively involved in scheduling their learning activities, the types and topics of which were completely relevant to their teaching practice. In other words, the PETs informally led their learning process, or the PLCs involved the PETs' informal leadership, which is ideally expected in literature on PLCs and professional learning (Stoll 2011; Timperley 2005).

However, the PETs' informal leadership was sometimes challenged by the ways that both the PETs and the leaders themselves perceived the power of authority and expertise that the leaders brought to the PLCs. For example, the PLCs' leaders sometimes exercised their formal leadership in scheduling of the PLCs' activities instead of the PETs, as occurred in the meetings PLC-A1, PLC-B2 and PLC-C2 (see Chapter 5). Standing from 'where [they sit] in the hierarchy' of the community (Copland 2003, p. 378), the leaders of these PLCs gave themselves the right to pre-determine what and how the PETs needed to learn, to which the PETs usually agreed or acquiesced. In this situation, it is likely that the PETs thought they needed to follow their leaders (Timperley 2005) and were 'reluctant to take on

their leadership roles' (Harris 2011, p. 631). Or they might have not developed 'an understanding of how leadership can work' (Katz & Earl 2010, p. 49); then, the PLCs' leaders or EFL consultant led the PETs' learning from their leadership roles to meet the expectation of tacit power or authority, which is inherent in any learning context (Widin 2015).

It is important to understand the notion of distribution of leadership in light of the social and cultural features of a particular context where it is exercised. In this situation, the PLCs were set up in the Vietnamese context, where there exists a large power distance; teachers are culturally respected by their students, and leaders are respected by their followers (Hofstede 2011; Hofstede, Hofstede & Minkov 2010). These cultural expectations placed upon leaders and followers are likely to influence 'who leads and who follows' (Copland 2003, p. 378) in the PLCs. Therefore, it can be argued that the leaders in the PLCs studied had perceived their authority as coming from being leaders and co-examiners of the Department, who had expertise in TEYL and a thorough understanding of the issues embedded in the TEYL practice, and the PETs following the leaders was culturally expected.

With regard to the shared and unique features that the PLCs in this study incorporated, it can be concluded that the BANA concept of PLCs has been reshaped through their interaction with the particularities of Thanh Van in Vietnam. The PLCs in this study did incorporate a number of the features of PLCs in different contexts: they were derived from the learners' needs, promoted reflective inquiry and had a culture of collaboration, albeit at a limited level. These features well reflected the nature of professional learning from a sociocultural perspective. In addition, the PLCs displayed their unique features, which were highly contextualised in the particular setting where the PETs interacted to learn to be able to teach EFL at primary schools. Embedded within a formal hierarchy of the DOET and primary schools, the PLCs required a high level of formal leadership from these hierarchical institutions while their aim was to distribute leadership across participants. This high level of control in the PLCs seemed to be appropriate to professional learning in the Vietnamese context. The PLCs have been successfully operating for more than eight years to cater for the needs of their learners. The formal leaders, namely the EFL consultant and PLCs' leaders, acted as

facilitators to provide significant supportive structures including physical space and time for the PETs to engage in their learning process. Meanwhile, the formal professional learning activity still allowed for situated or bottom-up learning opportunities that the PETs brought in through their active participation in scheduling or informally leading their activities. Put simply, the PLCs have been recontextualised or Vietnamised to fit the social, cultural and political features of teacher learning in Thanh Van in Vietnam. However, the recontextualisation of PLCs is also reflected through the relationships between the participants and the mediated learning process, which will be discussed in depth in the next two sections.

7.3 Relationships in professional learning communities

Positive relationships provide the social capital that enable people to work together effectively (West-Burnham & Otero 2004, cited in Katz & Earl 2010, p. 29). Thus, the facilitation of productive relationships is considered an indicator of a successful teacher network or community (Cassidy et al. 2008; Katz & Earl 2010). Katz and Earl's (2010) large-scale survey found a significant association between the positive relationships among the teachers in a network and changes in their thinking and teaching practices. According to Cassidy et al. (2008), any community has two kinds of relationships – 'internal and external' (p. 223). The internal relationships are those between its members, and the external are those with other stakeholders such as policy makers or funding bodies. In this study, I discuss the internal relationships among the PLCs' members and analyse them within different dimensions of interactions, including shared understanding, collegiality or trusting relationships, and mutual respect (adapted from Katz & Earl 2010, p. 44). In reference to the literature discussing relationships among participants in a community (Cassidy et al. 2008; Hargreaves 2007; O'Neill 2002; Stoll 2011), three terms including trust, collegiality and trusting relationships have been used alternatively in this study. The findings presented in Chapter 5 reveal that the PLCs incorporated multi-layered relationships among the participants, which embodied shared understandings, limited collegiality and power relationships.

7.3.1 Shared understanding

The data show that the relationships among the participants were underpinned by their common understanding of teaching practice. Joining a shared enterprise (Wenger 1998) of teaching English language at primary schools in the same city, the members of each PLC, including the PETs and the PLC's leaders, have shared a repertoire of curriculum and policy of English language teaching, and resources for teaching and learning. As explained in Chapter 2, the PETs have recently experienced a lot of challenges in teaching English language at primary schools in response to the National Project 2020 for foreign language education (Ministry of Education and Training 2008). The teachers were working with the draft English language curriculum and materials, resources that are in the process of being redeveloped and piloted (Do et al. 2011; Ministry of Education and Training 2010a; Nguyen et al. 2013; Phan et al. 2012); therefore, the teachers have had to deal with changes every academic year. Furthermore, in this study, the PETs who taught similar-aged students in the context of similar cultural, social and political features were more likely to understand each other's issues and work together towards possible solutions. For instance, the teachers in meeting A1 discussed how to visualise an English story with pictures to help their Year 3 students more easily understand its content. Similarly, the teachers in meeting B1 discussed how to strategically involve their students taking into account the short concentration spans of younger learners. Additionally, in order to meet the professional requirements of a PET (see Chapter 2), most of the PETs needed to be retrained or retrain themselves from their background as secondary school English language teachers. Thus, coming to the PLCs' activities, most of the PETs had 'a shared vision' (Stoll 2011) of learning how to teach. For these reasons, the teachers were more likely to feel comfortable when professionally interacting with each other in the PLCs' meetings and the PLCs became a space for those with shared understanding to interact and learn.

7.3.2 Trusting relationships

Collegiality or trust has been considered the 'backbone' of a PLC (Hargreaves 2007, p. 187), the 'social capital' for the success of a PLC (O'Neill 2002, p. 4), and the 'pre-

condition' of a PLC (Stoll 2011, p. 106). Previous studies have shown that trusting relationships are influential in teachers' professional learning (Hargreaves 2007; Katz & Earl 2010; Poehner 2011; Snow-Gerono 2005). This section discusses the extent to which collegiality or trusting relationships among the PETs in the PLCs developed and the way those relationships may have influenced their learning process.

It appears that trusting relationships among the participant teachers in the PLCs had not been sufficiently developed. The data gathered for this study show that a large number of the teachers were reluctant to share their ideas or experience in public, but did discuss professional issues with their established friends. This is similar to what was found in the literature on professional learning. It was evident from the literature that teachers are more likely to interact openly and frankly with those whom they feel able to share their opinions with, without fear of judgement (e.g., Christie et al. 2007; Farrell 2008; Katz & Earl 2010; Poehner 2011; Vo & Nguyen 2010). In a safe learning environment, teachers are able to 'gain more than suggestions on how to solve a problem' (Poehner 2011, p. 198). However, it seems that interaction among teachers in professional learning is a complex area. For example, Christie et al. (2007) found that because the teachers in a newly developed online community did not know each other prior to their online interactions, they did not feel comfortable enough to interact professionally. The situation of the teachers in my present study is contextually different. Most of the PETs in each PLC seemed to know each other prior to the meetings because its members have been relocated every two years. Also, all the PETs in the city would have attended many workshops or other professional learning programs organised by the DOET. The PETs knew each other, but their interactions were still inhibited. This suggests that professional interactions need investigating further in order to understand their complexity and to develop collegiality within the group of teachers.

While the evidence from the previous studies on collaborative learning among Vietnamese teachers is ambivalent, my study shows that where the building of good relationships was given some priority, the teachers felt able to contribute more freely. Previous research (Le & Nguyen 2012; Saito & Tsukui 2008; Saito,

Tsukui & Tanaka 2008) has revealed that Vietnamese teachers in the same school lack professional dialogue or communication due to the limited trust in their relationships or their common tendency to judge their peer teachers and students. The findings of this study depict a more positive picture of collaboration or trusting relationships and teachers' learning. The findings presented in Chapters 5 and 6 clearly show that the PETs became more engaged in collaborative inquiry with their peers or the experts towards the end of each meeting of the PLCs thanks to the leaders' facilitation. The PETs exchanged more of their teaching experiences and shared more issues or concerns to be resolved by the community. This occurred when the PLCs' leaders and the EFL consultant (when present) strategically facilitated the PETs' participation by consistently highlighting the PLCs' targets of exchanging teaching experiences, collectively resolving each other's issues, and not judging each other, or by nominating different PETs to contribute ideas even when they were reluctant to, or by creating discussion boards for the PETs with general questions or a focus on interesting topics. A culture of collective inquiry among the PETs was therefore being developed. The sharing among the PETs seems to be pertinent to what has been found in other previous studies on collaboration among Vietnamese teachers (Cham 2013; Nguyen 2016; Vo & Nguyen 2010). It has been suggested that within their critical friendships (Vo & Nguyen 2010) or a community of PETs in the same district (Nguyen 2016) the teachers actively interacted to exchange professional ideas, teaching experience, resources and challenges. These professional exchanges among teachers became fruitful when being facilitated by the leaders of their community (Cham 2013). A strong focus on relationship building is fundamental to effective collaboration and the benefits that teachers can gain from collaborative professional learning in a community or network.

Given that interaction in professional learning is a complex area, the findings of this study suggest that the development of trust and collegiality shown among the PETs might have been influenced by the constraints in implementing the PLCs' activities. As presented in Chapter 6, the stakeholders, particularly the PETs, acknowledged that the most serious constraint of the PLCs was not providing adequate time and space for the PETs to learn. The PLCs' meetings were conducted

infrequently (once or twice per four-month semester) and for a short period of time (observations of an English language lesson and 35-minute discussion). The thirty-five minutes or so allocated for each discussion section may not create enough space and time for more than 20 teachers to interact professionally and socially in order to develop their relationships. Hence, some of the PETs still perceived themselves as newcomers or peripheral participants, which accounts for their reluctance to share teaching experience and concerns. I would say that developing relationships among the PETs in a PLC involving different schools is as challenging as found in developing trust among teachers in a school-based learning community (Saito & Tsukui 2008) or it is always effortful (Bolam et al. 2005).

In short, collegiality or trusting relationships among the teachers in the PLCs was not sufficiently developed for the teachers to feel willing and comfortable enough to interact professionally with each other. When developing collegiality was given priority, teachers contributed more ideas and concerns and at the same time gained more in the PLCs.

7.3.3 Power relationships

As discussed in the Literature Review (Chapter 3), power relationships are inherent in most institutions or organisations and the way they are exercised depends on their specific context. This section provides an in-depth analysis of the power relationships within the PLCs and how they affected the PETs' learning process.

The study clearly suggests that power relationships existed in the PLCs. The PLCs' hierarchical structure emulated the hierarchies within the DOET and the primary schools in Thanh Van in Vietnam and hence implementation of their activities required formal leadership by the PLCs' leaders and EFL consultant (see Chapter 5). The power or authority of these institutions' leaders was present not only in the way that the PLCs operated, but also in the relationships among those who participated in the PLCs' activities. The findings presented in Chapter 5 highlighted that the PLCs mirrored the hierarchies that existed in the participants' external relationships. These participants brought their social roles into their interactions with each other in the PLCs. Their social roles respectively were as teachers who

needed to learn from their training backgrounds as secondary school EFL teachers, as senior PETs and co-examiners of the DOET, and as advisors and supervisors of teaching English language at primary schools in Thanh Van. The PLCs' leaders and the EFL consultant were therefore regarded as more insightful and powerful than the PETs, which resulted in a power distance in their relations.

It was shown in the study that the power distance was reflected through the interactions among the PETs, the PLCs' leaders and the EFL consultant. In most of the meetings, the PETs tended to turn to their PLCs' leaders for their opinions based on the leaders' experience and insight in TEYL. In a similar vein, the EFL consultant was respected for his expertise and authority and expected to provide solutions to or direct advice on the teaching issues that the PETs had. The EFL consultant himself also perceived his authority as being a leader or an advisor from the DOET, which was clearly seen in his language of advice. He used strong modal verbs such as 'nên nhớ' (bear in mind), 'phải' (must), or 'đề nghị' (request) in his advice on how language of instruction should be expressed or how flexible or eclectic the teachers should be when not following a model lesson. This suggests that the participants were exercising their power in accordance with their perception of their roles. The PETs perceived themselves to be inferior in terms of expertise in TEYL and in terms of authority in comparison with the PLCs' leaders or the EFL consultant. The leaders saw themselves to be more insightful and powerful than the PETs. This power relationship was consistent with what Cassidy et al. (2008) claimed about the relationship among the participants in a network, which is affected by their perceived status. In the hierarchical Vietnamese context, the leaders or experts were culturally perceived to be more knowledgeable and powerful than their followers (Hofstede 2011).

The findings presented in Chapter 6 suggest that the PLCs engaged the PETs as active and thoughtful learners to construct and reconstruct their knowledge and identity as a PET through interactive learning activities. However, being influenced by the power relationships culturally inherent among the participants in the PLCs, the experts' voice and knowledge were notably valued in the PLCs. The study shows that the PETs and the PLCs' leaders tended to rely on the EFL consultant as a source of knowledge in the field of TEYL and for direct advice guiding their EFL

teaching at their own primary schools. This kind of interaction does not reflect the dynamic and social nature of teacher learning from a sociocultural perspective (Johnson 2009), in which teachers are expected to internalise their newly-learned knowledge in reference to the particularities of their teaching practice. However, the PETs' over-reliance on the EFL consultant is consistent with what has been discussed in literature on Vietnamese teachers' learning. The way the PETs, in-service teachers, interacted with the EFL consultant, a leader and an expert, is similar to what Nguyen (2014) found in the rapport that pre-service teachers had with their teacher trainers at university and supervisors at high schools: the pre-service teachers were over-reliant on and fearful of their trainers and supervisors. Also, as discussed in Chapter 2, Vietnamese teachers have been familiar with receiving a body of knowledge from their trainers in their teacher training courses and programs. Hence, it is likely that the PETs as learners in the PLCs might not yet have 'moved away from [that] transmission model of teacher education to transformative perspective' (Kumaravadivelu 2012, p. 50). Or they might have established in their minds 'the need for dependence' on the experts or trainers (Hofstede, Hofstede & Minkov 2010, p. 69), which may be regarded as a common learning habit of the learners in a hierarchical setting like Vietnam.

To summarise, the multi-layered relationships made the PLCs distinctive and relevant learning sites for the PETs in Thanh Van in Vietnam. The teachers and PLCs' leaders were comfortable in their professional interactions as they joined a shared enterprise and repertoire of teaching English language to primary schools. However, the trusting relationships among the participants in the PLCs had not been sufficiently developed to promote frank and open sharing, but this was enhanced thanks to the leaders' strategic facilitation. More notably, power relationships among the participants are inevitable in a Vietnamised PLC, where the participants' external social roles are brought into play. However, while the power relationships were shown to be the case in many of the PLCs' activities, there were times when the hierarchies were disrupted. The PETs were able to exercise their authority in how the PLCs were running - making the PLCs' activities relevant to their learning needs.

7.4 Mediation in Teacher learning

The sociocultural perspective holds as a fundamental concept that human learning is mediated; therefore, it is argued that ‘any attempts to ground explanations of mental development in the isolated individuals are inadequate’ (Lantolf 2000, p. 14). Mediation is claimed as paramount for internalisation or cognitive development, which is ‘characterised as the progressive movement from external, socially mediated activity to internal mediation controlled by individual learners’ (Johnson & Golombek 2003, p. 731). Humans interact with their learning environment through a variety of mediational tools, including cultural artefacts, concepts and social relations. Teacher learning is, therefore, mediated through these mediational tools (Johnson & Golombek 2011). In this section, I discuss how the PETs’ learning was mediated through the professional learning activities that they engaged in, the use of the concepts of language teaching and learning and the social interactions that the teachers experienced.

7.4.1 Mediation through cultural artefacts

The findings highlighted in Chapter 6 reveal that the cultural artefacts in the PLCs promoted the PETs’ internalisation. Cultural artefacts and activities are described as ‘simultaneously material and conceptual aspects’ that make up human goal-oriented activities (Lantolf & Thorne 2006, p. 62). Through the goal-oriented activities, teacher learning is mediated (Johnson & Golombek 2011). As presented in Chapter 6, the PETs engaged in a variety of learning activities in collaboration with others. The PETs learned by delivering and observing demonstration lessons and by engaging in the discussion sections to give feedback on the observed lessons or to exchange their experiences and issues in teaching English language in their primary schools. These collaborative learning activities shared a common goal, namely, learning to improve their English language teaching practice in primary schools, which has been reported to be problematic in Vietnam (Le & Do 2012; Nguyen 2011; Nunan 2003) and in other contexts (Baldauf et al. 2011; Copland, Garton & Burns 2013; Enever 2014; Hayes 2014) (see Chapter 2 for detailed problems). This study clearly shows that the learning opportunities in the PLCs worked as material tools to mediate the PETs’ learning by physically

engaging them in their learning process as active learners (Johnson & Golombek 2011). The teachers learned by teaching and observing others. Also, they learned by professionally interacting with those who shared the same domain of teaching English language to younger learners, namely the other PETs, the PLCs' leaders and the EFL consultant, and shared their repertoires of teaching and learning facilities.

Additionally, the collaborative learning activities in the PLCs also functioned as psychological tools to stimulate the PETs' thinking in their learning process (Johnson & Golombek 2011). It was found in the study that by engaging in those activities, the demonstration and observer teachers became thoughtful learners. They critically analysed the strengths and shortcomings of the demonstrations and their previous teachings taking into account the particularities of their teaching and learning conditions and the students' characteristics. They worked towards possible ways they could improve their English language teaching, such as involving more students in a language game or giving short and simple instructions in conducting an activity (see Chapter 6 for more examples). By doing so, they demonstrated their ability to reflect on their practice, and to be reflective practitioners (Schön 1987). As shown in Chapter 6, the PETs reflected on the others' and their own teaching not only by themselves, but in collaboration with the other participants in the PLCs. They engaged in social relations with their peer PETs, the PLCs' leaders and the EFL consultant in the discussion time of each meeting (This will be further discussed later in this section). As a result, the teachers were able to externalise socially their understandings of teaching English language to younger learners. For instance, in meeting A1, the teachers discussed the benefits of visualisation in facilitating their primary school students' comprehension of a reading text. Pictures or photos can be used to assist visualisation of the content of an English story. This is considered the first step in the process of internalisation that teachers are expected to take before moving to 'internal mediation controlled by the individual learners' (Johnson & Golombek 2003, p. 731). Further analysis of the data on the PETs' internalisation reveals that the PETs had experienced 'internal mediation' of what and how to teach in their particular teaching context. For example, teacher Thanh internalised the strategy

of visualising a reading text that was shared in meeting A1 and successfully used a set of pictures to introduce an English story to her Year 3 students. Teacher Trang (PLC-B) internalised the KISS rule (Keep It Short and Simple) of giving instruction to keep her language of instruction short and simple. Or teacher Dung (PLC-D) tried to use more English in her EFL lessons.

In short, the collaborative learning activities in which the PETs engaged in the PLCs functioned as material and psychological tools to mediate their learning process. The teachers learned by physically teaching, observing others teaching, and professionally interacting with others about their teaching. At the same time, the teachers were thoughtful learners, thinking about the others' and their own teaching in collaboration with the peer teachers and the experts. By doing so, they were involved in the transformative process of internalisation, an important step in teacher learning from within a sociocultural perspective.

7.4.2 Mediation through concepts

In addition to the cultural artefacts or activities that the PETs engaged in, the teachers' learning process was mediated through the concepts or theories of English language learning and teaching.

The findings of this study clearly show that the PETs' learning in the PLCs was mediated through the use of scientific concepts of language learning and teaching in general and TEYL in particular. According to Johnson and Golombek (2011), scientific concepts represent the theory developed from current research in the field of second language teacher education that attempts to explain the teachers' practical experiences with their students, which are called everyday concepts. Language teachers are equipped with scientific concepts of second language teaching and learning in order to 'restructure and transform their everyday concepts' (Johnson & Golombek 2011, p. 4). As presented in Chapter 6, the theoretical concepts of ELT and TEYL were drawn on by the PLCs' leaders and the EFL consultant in order to explain the underlying principles of the 'critical incidents' (Richards & Farrell 2005, p. 113) from the demonstrations or other teaching issues raised by the PETs in the community. For instance, the PLC-C's leader insisted that no explanation of grammar rules was needed in presenting an

English structure of *'There is or There are'* to their primary students as children learn a language mainly by imitating (Meeting C3). The PLC-A's leader asked the PETs to recall the benefits of using language games before observing the game demonstrations (Meeting A3). The EFL consultant referred to the KISS rule (Keep it Short and Simple) of giving instructions to students upon giving her feedback on demonstration teacher Ly's instruction in every meeting he attended (e.g., Meetings A1, B2, C1). It is likely that these scientific concepts or theories of ELT and TEYL became clearer to the PETs when they were identified in the critical incidents that the PETs were exposed to in these three meetings.

The findings strongly suggest that the PETs' learning process in the PLCs was no longer seen as 'a matter of apprenticing oneself as a novice to someone who is skilled and more experienced' (Hargreaves 2000, p. 155) or the acquisition of an inventory of knowledge, skills and understandings about teaching designed by the experts for one setting and applied in any other teaching context (Kelly 2006). Rather, the PLCs' leaders and the EFL consultant helped the teachers recall the theoretical concepts underpinning teaching English language that they had studied in their pre-service teacher training programs or other in-service programs. The incidents in the demonstrations and in their previous teaching were intentionally examined in the light of these scientific concepts. The teachers were then able to construct the teaching knowledge that was embedded in their particular teaching practice. This finding suggests that the PLCs' activities helped the teachers to establish and/or re-establish links between theory and practice in a way that they might not usually do in other professional learning activities. In other words, the teachers were learning to develop both knowledge for practice and knowledge of practice (Cochran-Smith & Lytle 1999), or both professional knowledge and procedural knowledge (Kumaravadivelu 2012) of teaching EFL to their primary school students.

Continuing with my view of the PLC as a mediated learning site, the notion of copying is significant. Through the explicit use of scientific concepts of English language teaching and learning and TEYL as a tool to mediate the PETs' learning process in the PLCs, the teachers were learning by 'copying to be understood' (Edge 2011, p. 51). In general, learning by copying is often seen as a negative

behaviour. In relation to teacher learning, however, Edge (2011) has argued that copying 'is likely to be stronger than whatever [language teachers] are taught in their teacher education programs' (p. 50). He emphasised that copying is actually an inevitable action that most teachers do while they are language learners at schools and during their pre-service training programs and teaching practicums. Therefore, the action of copying continues and becomes unconsciously methodological – knowing how to teach (Edge 2011) within each individual teacher.

The study clearly shows that the PLCs provided the PETs with opportunities to become more conscious of methodological issues and to develop their knowledge and skills by observing and copying their demonstration teachers. This was followed by a reference to theory-based concepts of language teaching and learning that the leaders and EFL consultant explicitly used to critically analyse the strengths and shortcomings of the demonstrations. The PETs were therefore able to understand the rationale or principles underlying those teaching behaviours and decided to copy what was relevant to their teaching practice. Edge (2011) called this learning process 'copying to be understood' (p. 51), which allowed them to understand both theoretical and everyday concepts of language teaching and the particularities of their teaching practice. In other words, through understanding and copying others' teaching behaviours, the process of internalisation occurred and the PETs grew professionally.

From what has been discussed above, it can be concluded that the PETs' learning in the PLCs was mediated in the light of theories of ELT and TEYL. The teachers developed their knowledge of TEYL practice when the theories of English language teaching and TEYL were explicitly recalled to examine their everyday concepts of teaching and the critical incidents they observed in the PLCs' demonstrations and in their own teaching practices. It was the concept-mediated learning experience that allowed the PETs to 'copy to be understood' in order to become methodological PETs. The teachers learned to construct both theoretical knowledge of TEYL and practical knowledge of teaching English to their particular group of primary school students. This mediated learning experience mainly

occurred through social relations in the PLCs, which will be discussed in the next section.

7.4.3 Mediation through social relations

From a sociocultural perspective, teacher learning is ‘a form of socialisation into the professional thinking and practices of a community’ (Richards 2008, p. 160) or a dynamic social activity, which is emerging out of and through ‘experiences in multiple social contexts’ (Johnson 2009, p. 10). Within this framework, social interactions or relations can be seen as key elements in mediating teacher learning. Johnson and Golombek (2011) called these social interactions ‘human mediation’, which results in ‘the transformative process of internalisation’ (p. 5). According to Johnson and Golombek, forms of human mediation vary depending on the kinds of learning activities that teachers participate in and the contexts in which mediation takes place. As presented in Chapter 6, in the PLCs, the PETs had opportunities to interact with each other through their preferred activities including demonstrations, observations and discussions. Engaging in these activities, the teachers experienced three forms of social interactions: among the peer teachers, between the teachers and the PLCs’ leaders, and between the teachers and the EFL consultant when he was present. This section discusses how these forms of human mediation or social relations promoted the PETs’ learning.

7.4.3.1 Peer interactions

The findings of this study indicate that the PETs’ learning was mediated through their peer interactions. As highlighted in Chapter 6, the PETs interacted with their peers when preparing for the demonstration lessons, giving feedback on the strengths and shortcomings of the demonstration lessons, and exchanging their experiences and issues in teaching English language to their primary school students. However, this kind of social interaction among the PETs often relied on the strategic mediation of the PLCs’ leaders and the EFL consultant. As discussed in Section 7.3 above, with the leaders’ strategic facilitation, teachers developed their collegiality and felt more comfortable to participate in the PLCs. Towards the end of each meeting, more ideas and teaching issues were shared with the community. At the same time, many of the PETs sometimes turned to their critical friends or in-

school colleagues to chat professionally in the discussion sections. Through these social interactions, either open to all other peers or closed to their critical friends, the PETs were able to learn to improve their teaching practice. The sharing of knowledge, professional ideas and teaching experience among the PETs in the PLCs accords with the concept of peer learning in the literature of learning (Boud, Cohen & Sampson 2001; Keppell et al. 2006; Topping 2005). Defined as 'a two-way, reciprocal learning activity' (Boud, Cohen & Sampson 2001, p. 3), peer learning has been recognised as an effective strategy for learners to learn from each other (Keppell et al. 2006) and benefit mutually (Boud, Cohen & Sampson 2001). In the field of teacher development, peer learning among the teachers is also known as peer coaching or peer observation (Richards & Farrell 2005). With their peers of a shared understanding (see Section 7.3), the PETs learned the strategies of managing their English language classrooms. They discussed the sequence of a lesson or an activity, their strategies for involving more students in language games, and tips in designing and using teaching aids. By the same token, they constructed and reconstructed their concept of an enjoyable EFL lesson and self-image of a friendly PET.

The learning among peer PETs in the PLCs strongly suggests that the scope of the zone of proximal development in the PLCs expanded beyond interactions between novices and experts, and included peer interactions. The PETs interacted with peers, learned and grew. The findings presented in Chapter 6 reveal that by engaging in the PLCs' activities, which included observations and post-lesson discussion time, the PETs were enabled to reflect on their previous teaching experiences. It is clear from the data that prior to the interactions among the teachers in the PLCs' meetings, the PETs had conducted certain strategies for managing their English language classrooms. These techniques might or might not have been effective in their own judgment. In the PLCs' meetings, the teachers recalled or reflected on the strategies (Schön 1987) in dialogue with their peers. These conversations are known as reflective dialogues, which have been proven to be efficient in teachers' professional growth (Chien 2013; Farrell 2008). Professionally communicating with colleagues was highlighted in Chien's (2013) study as one of the strategies which resulted in more analysis of teachers'

reflective journals for better teaching practice. In a similar vein, Farrell (2008) claimed that teachers articulated their thoughts more easily when reflecting in a group of peer teachers with different perspectives; they developed their professional identity and constructed their knowledge of teaching. Analysis of the data presented in Chapter 6 clearly suggests that the benefits the PETs obtained from their peer interactions were consistent with the results of Chien's (2013) and Farrell's (2008) studies. They constructed their procedural knowledge of managing their EFL classrooms and recognised their self-image of a good EFL lesson and a good PET and made significant improvements in EFL teaching at primary schools as confirmed by the stakeholders' voices.

7.4.3.2 Interactions with the leaders

From the study, it is clear that besides being mediated through their peers, the PETs' learning was also mediated through the social relations the teachers had with the PLCs' leaders and the EFL consultant. These social relations that the PETs had with the PLCs' leaders and the EFL consultant were reflected by the way in which the leaders fulfilled their roles as moderators and as advisors to mediate their professional learning in the PLCs.

As discussed in Chapter 6, the PLCs' leaders and EFL consultant worked strategically as moderators to promote the PET's participation in the PLCs. In most of the PLCs' discussions, the PETs seemed to be very quiet or reluctant to contribute their ideas at first, but then became very engaged after one or two ideas were raised. Wertsch's (1985) notion of 'strategic mediation' was used by these leaders to give 'efficient, targeted and goal-oriented' (Johnson 2009, p. 20) support to the PETs in their learning process. Specifically, in the discussion sections, the PLCs' leaders invited each teacher to contribute ideas when none voiced an opinion. They strategically led the PETs' feedback on each part of the lesson (e.g., following the sequence of the demonstration lesson). Also, from the perspective of a senior PET with updated insight in TEYL, the leaders of PLCs-A, B and C were able to identify the shortcomings in the demonstrations that the PETs were likely to learn from. Thus, they strategically guided the discussion to a specific demonstration activity when they were aware of its shortcomings (e.g., how to

involve students more in language games in meeting B1). By this, the leaders efficiently promoted collaborative and reflective inquiry among the teachers and succeeded in leading their professional learning (Stoll 2011; Timperley 2011). They identified the knowledge and skills the PETs needed to learn to teach in their primary school students. The discussion and reflections in the PLCs' meetings became more focused and goal-oriented, which the literature suggests is beneficial to a teacher's professional learning. For example, Smolcic (2011) in Ecuador found guided discussions were efficient in developing ESL teachers' intercultural competence when they engaged in a short-term teaching experience and a cultural and linguistic immersion program involving social relations between the teachers and mentors. In a similar vein, my study clearly shows that the teachers became more engaged in the guided discussions, where they were able to 'upload' or share their experience and challenges in TEYL and 'download and use' the ideas from the community for their own teaching (Katz & Earl 2010, p. 29). In other words, the PETs engaged in their learning process as thoughtful learners thanks to the leaders' strategic mediation.

Additionally, the findings presented in Chapters 5 and 6 reveal that the leaders and the consultant mediated the PETs' learning by strategically asking broad questions to promote reflective inquiry. For instance, in meeting A2, the EFL consultant asked the demonstration teacher a general question: *'What issues do you have in planning and teaching your lesson?' or 'What objectives were obtained or what parts in the lesson were you satisfied most or not satisfied with?'* Another example is when the leader of meeting C1 suggested to the observer teachers: *'You can compare your previous teachings with the lesson today. What are the good points in the demonstration?'* (see Chapters 5 and 6 for more examples). With these general questions, the shyness among the teachers at the beginning of each discussion section was broken. At the beginning of meeting A2, demonstration teacher Lan, after being encouraged by the EFL consultant, shared: *'I haven't ever observed any lesson using MOET's new textbooks. When designing the lesson, I just followed teacher guide. I found the lesson too long and predicted that it would be overtimed, but decided to follow, taught and hoped to receive feedback from you.'* Afterwards, other teachers contributed: *'I think the warm-up was long. Just use only*

activity to save time or *I want to give feedback on teacher Lan's setting the scene*. (Meeting A2, 07/11/2013). The discussion became more focused and targeted and the PETs seemed to be more engaged - sharing more teaching experience and issues, towards the end of discussion time. The way the leaders mediated the teachers' participation with general questions reflects what previous studies have found about the role of mentors in facilitating teacher learning (Mann & Tang 2012; Smith & Lewis 2015). The assistance that the leaders and consultant gave the PETs was 'graduated ... [neither] too much ... [nor] too little' (Wertsch 1985, cited in Johnson & Golombek 2011, p. 7) to maximise the teachers' autonomous learning and self-reflection. The leaders worked in the role of mentors having dialogues with the PETs while they vocalised their self-reflections (Mann & Tang 2012). In a similar vein, the PLCs' leaders and EFL consultant asked broad questions as 'a springboard for further conversation' to promote the teachers' 'critical self-reflection' (Smith & Lewis 2015, p. 146). According to Smith and Lewis (2015), the strategy of creating a springboard for further conversation creates a supportive framework on which the teachers build their confidence. This framework is pertinent to what was found in my study. The PETs were more confident in their professional sharing; hence, collaborative inquiry was more likely to be promoted among the participants.

In addition to their role as moderators, the PLCs' leaders and EFL consultant interacted socially with the PETs as advisors to mediate the teachers' learning process. As discussed in Sections 7.3.4 and 7.4.2, the interactions between the PETs and the PLCs' leaders and the EFL consultant were guided by the power of expertise. The teachers turned to the PLCs' leaders as senior PETs for their teaching experience and insight, and to the EFL consultant for his expertise and direct advice on how to teach EFL at their primary school. It was also found in the study that these leaders themselves perceived the power of their expertise in the field of TEYL and acted as advisors to mediate the PETs' learning. As presented in Chapter 6 and in section 7.4.2 above, in most of the discussion sections, these leaders or experts drew on the theoretical concepts of ELT or TEYL to rationalise the PETs' teaching behaviours and concerns.

It has been argued that formal instruction is the only way to explicitly and systematically introduce theories of learning and teaching, which results in 'a deeper understanding of or control over the subject of study' (Johnson & Golombek 2011, p. 5). In the PLCs, there was no formal instruction of the theoretical concepts of English language teaching and TEYL to the PETs. However, the unsystematic use of the scientific concepts may still have exerted a marked impact on the development of the PETs' knowledge and skills. Strategically drawn on by the leaders or experts who were present in the PLCs, theories of ELT or TEYL became embedded in the teachers' practice, and therefore were more meaningful to their learning. By this, the concept of scaffolding in language learning (Gibbons 2003, 2015) accords well with how the PETs' learning was mediated through their interactions with the leaders as experts in the field and as advisors in the PLCs. They provided scaffolding interpretation (Lave & Wenger 1991) of the critical incidents or issues that the PETs were concerned about; the PETs then moved their understanding of theories and teaching practice to a new level. Their professional and procedural knowledge or knowledge for practice and knowledge of practice enlightened one another and therefore developed. Emerging from the findings, this study also suggests that upon returning to their teaching, the PETs were able to transform it in certain aspects, specifically to sharpen their language of instructions to follow the KISS rule (teachers Dung and Trang), to involve more students in language games (teacher Trang), to visualise abstract new words when presenting their meanings (teacher Anh), to contextualise the story through visuals before introducing details of a story (teacher Thanh), and so on. The teachers had therefore grown professionally within their zone of proximal development.

From the discussion in this section, it can be concluded that the PLCs mediated the PETs' learning process in ways that were similar to learning communities in other contexts, but significantly relevant to their specific group of learners in the particular context of Thanh Van. The findings strongly suggest that the PETs' learning process was not an isolated endeavour residing in an individual teacher's mind. Rather, their learning was mediated through the social activities they participated in, the theoretical concepts of language teaching and learning, and

their social relations. The PLCs' commonly preferred activities, including teaching, observing demonstrations, and engaging in discussions, worked as material tools to physically engage the PETs in their professional learning. These activities also functioned as psychological tools to stimulate the PETs to think and hone their teaching practices on their own and in dialogue with the other participants in the PLCs. Wherever their trusting relationship was promoted, the peer PETs had professional dialogues on critical incidents and teaching issues with reference to the particularities of teaching practice. However, these reflective dialogues among the teachers sometimes required the leaders' strategic facilitation. Noticeably, the PETs' learning was mediated through the PLCs' leaders' and consultant's use of scientific concepts of ELT in general and of TEYL in particular. The use of theoretical concepts enabled the PETs to understand the underlying principles of the critical incidents from the demonstrations that they all observed in the PLCs' meetings and became methodological by copying to be understood. Additionally, the concepts of peer learning and scaffolding, which have been long established in student learning and language learning, now accord with the approach that the PETs learned through the social interactions with their peer PETs, the PLCs' leaders and the EFL consultant. The leaders and EFL consultant strategically mediated the PETs' learning as moderators or mentors facilitating the discussions and as advisors enhancing the PETs' knowledge of practice in their unsystematic, but meaningful use of theories of ELT and TEYL. In general, engaging in the PLCs' activities, the PETs were more likely to transform in their teaching and grow professionally within their zone of proximal development, which included both peer interactions and interactions between teachers and experts.

7.5 Summary of the chapter

Literature has included studies examining possible factors or enablers which contribute to the successful implementation of PLCs or similar activities for teachers in various contexts, and benefits that the teachers could obtain from these collaborative learning opportunities (e.g., Bolam et al. 2005; Christie et al. 2007; Harris 2011; Katz & Earl 2010; Owen 2014; Zellermayer & Tabak 2006). The present study explored the specific ways that the BANA concept of PLCs was

reshaped to create learning sites for the PETs in Thanh Van. Taking a sociocultural perspective as a theoretical lens and my understandings of the setting as an insider researcher, this study has provided in-depth accounts of how the PLCs have been recontextualised and the mediated-learning process occurred in that particular context.

In the first place, the findings of the present research strongly suggest that the concept of PLCs, which originated from and has been widely used in the BANA countries, has been recontextualised for Thanh Van in Vietnam. It was found that beside a number of important features, which were commonly found in PLCs in different contexts, the PLCs in that particular context incorporated unique features relevant to the particular social, cultural and political features of the professional learning setting in the city. Reflecting the core premise of professional learning from a sociocultural perspective, the PLCs' activities were derived from the PETs' learning needs, thus sharing the focus of improving the practice of teaching English language at primary schools, and promoting a culture of reflective inquiry and collaboration among the PETs. These are considered the enablers of a successful PLC or teacher community (Stoll 2011). Significantly, it was found in the present study that the development and implementation of the PLCs required a high level of formal leadership of the 'heroic' leaders from the hierarchical institutions, the DOET and primary schools. Specifically, that was the formal leadership of the EFL consultant and the PLCs' leaders. The PLCs in this context were designed as a top-down, official and compulsory professional learning activity for the PETs. This high level of control seems to have worked well in the Vietnamese context, where the PLCs have been operating as official professional learning sites since 2008 and teachers' attendance has been regular.

In the second place, the study clearly shows that the PLCs were recontextualised and incorporated different layers of relationships among the participants. In the literature of PLCs (e.g., Cassidy et al. 2008; Katz & Earl 2010; Owen 2014; Stoll 2011), relationship was counted as a trusting relationship or collegiality among the participants and regarded as an essential factor of an effective and productive PLC. In these reshaped PLCs, three layers of relationship were incorporated; they included shared understandings, collegiality and power relationships. By

participating in the PLCs, the PETs and the PLCs' leaders demonstrated their mutual interest in not only learning to teach English language at primary schools, but also sharing their understandings of the challenges in teaching practices and their repertoires of teaching and learning facilities that take into account the social, cultural and political features of Thanh Van. On the other hand, it appears that the collegiality among the teachers in the PLCs did not develop sufficiently due to the time constraints in the implementation process. As a result, many teachers found themselves as peripheral participants in the community, which meant their communications were not always as open and frank as they could be. More notably, the internal relationships among the participants in the PLCs were affected by the external social roles they brought into the PLCs. The PETs respected and interacted with the PLCs' leaders and EFL consultant for their expertise in TEYL and for direct advice from a leader of the DOET on how to teach EFL at primary schools. Thus, the interactions among these participants reflected their power relationships.

Significantly, this study discovered the ways in which the Vietnamese PETs' learning was mediated. This has not been detailed in previous research in the same context. The PETs' learning process in the PLCs was mediated through their cultural artefacts, the use of scientific concepts of ELT and TEYL, and the social interactions among the participants. The commonly preferred cultural artefacts or activities in the PLCs, including observations and discussions, worked as material tools to physically engage the teachers in their learning process and as psychological tools to stimulate the teachers' reflection on their own and others' teachings. Despite being established as a top-down professional learning activity by the DOET, the PETs engaged in the PLCs' learning activities as active and thoughtful learners, which made the PLCs a learning space relevant to them and allowed for bottom-up professional learning. Distinctively, the PLCs in Thanh Van support both peer learning and scaffolded learning between teachers and experts, who were the PLCs' leaders and the EFL consultant. Through these social interactions, the PETs learned by observing, critically reflecting on each other's teachings in light of theories of ELT and TEYL and collectively resolving their teaching issues. The PETs were therefore able to develop both professional

knowledge and procedural knowledge of TEYL and their professional identities as PETs.

To conclude, the findings of this study strongly suggest that the PLCs have been reshaped to operate as learning sites for the PETs in Thanh Van to learn to teach EFL from their background of secondary school EFL teachers. Emulating the hierarchical structure of the DOET, primary schools and Vietnamese society, the PLCs involved a high level of formal leadership from these institutions, multi-layered relationships, and mediated learning. With these distinctive features, the PLCs allowed for self-directed, inquiry-based and collaborative learning for the PETs, which emphasised both peer learning and learning with experts. Based on the study's unique findings, the next chapter – Chapter 8 – discusses the study's contributions and recommendations for promoting professional learning in the Vietnamese context. It also suggests areas for further research.

CHAPTER 8: Conclusions and Recommendations

8.1 Introduction

Professional learning is regarded as an essential factor in improving the quality of teachers' teaching and students' learning outcomes (e.g., Boyle, Lamprianou & Bolye 2005; Garet et al. 2001; Meiers & Ingvarson 2005; Timperley et al. 2007). It is therefore important to conduct research on professional learning in contexts where educational reforms or new educational policies are continuously developed; for example, in the Vietnamese context with the National Foreign Language Education Project 2020 (Ministry of Education and Training 2008). Arising from this project, it has been shown that secondary trained Vietnamese PETs have had to meet the explicit and implicit demands of learning to teach EFL at primary schools (see Chapter 2). Little research has been undertaken to examine how Vietnamese PETs actually learn in response to those demands. The research reported in this thesis is a unique work investigating the procedures and processes that a specific innovative professional learning activity, called PLCs, engaged Vietnamese PETs in Thanh Van, as learners. It is important to restate here that there were two main goals encapsulated in this study, including identifying the features of PLCs conducted in the specific context of Thanh Van and discovering the ways that the PLCs allowed for professional learning of PETs in that particular context. With these focuses, the study is highly contextualised and provides insights into the ways PLCs operated and Vietnamese PETs learned in ways that were not found in any other studies.

Adopting a sociocultural perspective as a theoretical framework enabled this research to gain a deep insight into how the PETs learn in the PLCs. This sociocultural perspective placed great emphasis on consideration of the impacts of context and collaboration upon the construction of teachers' knowledge. Teacher learning is life-long, socially interactive and embedded in a specific context. From this perspective, the research, presented in this thesis, was based on a particular epistemological stance that emphasises the active roles the PETs played in the construction of their own knowledge. This knowledge construction was mediated through the social activities that the PETs engaged in, specifically observing and

analysing each other's teaching and collaboratively solving their issues in day-to-day practice.

A qualitative case study was adopted as the research approach in this study. It was a logical choice in order to make sense of and interpret the complex situations and meanings of the PLCs' operations and PETs' learning in that particular context. Using a qualitative case study research method, I had opportunities to undertake extensive fieldwork, spending much time with the participants in the PLCs and interviewing the stakeholders at different times. I therefore built up confidence and trust between me, as an overt researcher, and the participants, who then seemed to behave naturally. Anticipating the cultural challenge of Vietnamese teachers' reluctance to speak openly in public, interview was used in conjunction with observation in order to unpack the complexity of PETs' learning, including the PETs' silent modes of engagement as learners. Future researchers conducting research on teacher learning in Vietnam, and in other similar contexts, could benefit from taking into account the challenges I had in designing a research methodology to fit particularly to this specific context of Vietnamese teachers' learning. By employing that research methodology, I was able to obtain rich data, and was able to take into account almost all possible social variables relating to the development and implementation of four PLCs and the PETs' learning process. Conceptual categories or patterns of developing and implementing PLCs and collaborative learning for PETs were inductively developed.

Analysing the rich data through the theoretical lens of a sociocultural perspective, Kumaravadivelu's (2012) modules for language teacher education and my perspective as an insider researcher, I obtained a nuanced understanding of the ways the PLCs in that particular context ran and how the PETs learned collaboratively. I also brought to the fore the issues of leadership and power relationships that likely determined the ways that collaborative professional learning was made available for Vietnamese teachers, which was found in little literature on Vietnamese teachers' learning. This study therefore made an evidence-based contribution to (1) knowledge of implementing Vietnam's new national language policy, (2) knowledge of professional learning for Vietnamese

teachers in general and for Vietnamese PETs in particular, and (3) knowledge of developing and implementing PLCs.

The next section will discuss the study's contributions. In the light of these contributions, recommendations for further developing PLCs in Thanh Van and other similar settings in Vietnam and for promoting in-service teachers' professional learning in the Vietnamese context are suggested in this chapter. The chapter continues with an outline of the limitations of this study and directions for further studies.

8.2 Contributions of the study

8.2.1 Contribution to the implementation of Vietnam's national language policy

The study has made a significant contribution to the evidence base relating to the implications of implementing Vietnam's new national language policy of lowering the starting age of learning a foreign language, specifically English language (Ministry of Education and Training 2008). The review of the literature determined that the majority of Vietnamese PETs were dealing with the requirements to improve their English language proficiency and their approaches to TEYL in response to the burgeoning of EFL in the primary sector (Kaplan, Baldauf & Kamwangamalu 2011; Le & Do 2012; Moon 2009; Nguyen 2007; Nunan 2003). It was also established that little had been done to develop an evidence base for the ways in which Vietnamese PETs actually learn. Previous studies in the field of TEYL in the Vietnamese context (e.g., Hayes 2008b; Le & Do 2012; Moon 2009; Nguyen 2011; Nguyen 2012b; Pham 2013) mainly outlined the problematic practice of English language teaching and learning at primary school level in Vietnam, identified the professional learning activities available and unavailable for Vietnamese PETs or discussed possible benefits or shortcomings of formal professional learning programs conducted for Vietnamese PETs. This study went further than these attempts, and actually mapped out the procedures and processes that Vietnamese PETs in Thanh Van learned and benefitted from through a specific professional learning activity, called PLCs.

Although this study focused on the learning processes of Vietnamese PETs in only one city of Vietnam, its outcomes nevertheless depict a true picture of how Vietnamese PETs developed in response to the explicit and implicit learning demands placed upon them by the new language policy (see Chapter 2). The study was conducted in the setting of a central city, where English language has been widely taught at primary level since the early 1990s (Ha 2006) and the majority of PETs must have struggled to teach English to their primary school students from their training background as secondary school teachers. The PLCs have been developed as a central professional learning activity for the PETs across the city to learn from each other since 2008, when the new national language policy was issued.

The outcomes of this research clearly show that the PETs in the PLCs experienced a bottom-up and interactive learning approach (Johnson 2006), which is completely different from the transmission and theory-oriented approach that Vietnamese teachers have had in conventional formal professional development programs such as workshops or training courses (Hanamo 2008; Le 2002; Le & Nguyen 2012; Pham 2007b) or even in the first series of large-scale and practical workshops on TEYL within the framework of the National Language Project 2020 (Pham 2013). It is apparent from this research that the PETs were active and thoughtful learners and their knowledge construction was not transmitted from experts, but inquiry-embedded, situated and socially constructed in the PLCs' activities. The PETs often decided on the types and topics of learning activities that they found beneficial to their development. They developed their knowledge of TEYL and their self-image as a PET by observing demonstrations of challenging topics, analysing the strengths and shortcomings of their own and the others' teaching, and internalising the socially mediated knowledge in regard to the particularities of their students and teaching conditions. These learning experiences occurred both through their social interactions with others and in their private reflections.

The Vietnam's MOET and DOETs in other cities can refer to the detailed accounts of the PETs' learning process presented in this thesis in developing a professional learning syllabus for Vietnamese PETs in implementing the national policy of

introducing English to primary schools. Inquiry-embedded and socially mediated learning activities for PETs could be carried out inside or outside their school along with formal learning programs such as workshops or short training courses.

8.2.2 Contribution to the knowledge of professional learning

Since the research for this thesis took careful account of social and policy contexts, the outcomes form a significant contribution to our understanding of the ways in which Vietnamese teachers learn and benefit from innovative professional learning opportunities. From a sociocultural perspective, professional learning needs to allow for teachers' 'self-directed, collaborative and inquiry-based learning' (Johnson 2006, p. 243). Learning of this kind has been confirmed to be beneficial to teachers' professional growth in various contexts (e.g., Garet et al. 2001; Harris & Jones 2010; Zellermayer & Tabak 2006). However, this approach has only recently arrived in Vietnam and ambivalent outcomes had been reported in a limited number of previous studies in the Vietnamese context (Cham 2013; Le & Do 2012; Saito & Tsukui 2008; Vo & Nguyen 2010). With a logical and efficient use of research methodology and analytical frameworks (see Chapters 3 and 4), this study has gained great insights and nuanced understandings of how self-directed, inquiry-based and collaborative learning was happening and benefitting Vietnamese teachers.

The results of this study are pertinent to what was found in previous studies on how teachers in other contexts in other countries (Poehner 2011; Samimy et al. 2011; Zellermayer & Tabak 2006), and in Vietnam (Cham 2013; Vo & Nguyen 2010) learned collaboratively and participated actively in the learning process. As explained in the previous section (Section 8.2.1), by engaging in the PLCs, PETs in Thanh Van worked towards self-directing their professional learning, and constructing knowledge of teaching EFL to their particular group of primary school students. Their learning process was socially mediated through the collaborative activities and social relations in the PLCs. By its empirical nature, this evidence strongly confirms that when being facilitated, Vietnamese teachers engaged in their learning process as active and thoughtful learners and socially interacted

with others to grow professionally. The teachers developed their knowledge for and of practice, as well as their self-image as PETs.

Significantly, my study brought to the knowledge base new aspects of collaborative professional learning in the Vietnamese context. The findings of this study revealed that collaborative professional learning for the PETs in the PLCs was not only limited to peer learning (Boud, Cohen & Sampson 2001; Richards & Farrell 2005; Topping 2005), but also involved scaffolding, which is reported to be effective in students' language learning (Gibbons 2003; Gibbons 2007). As noted in the previous section, Vietnamese teachers in this study learned and grew professionally through social relations they had in the PLCs. The social relations included interactions among peer PETs and interactions between teachers and the PLCs' leaders and the EFL consultant. These leaders were considered the experts in TEYL and the authorities from the Department, whose voices weighed considerably in shaping the PETs' knowledge. It is apparent from the findings that these experts strategically mediated or scaffolded teachers' learning by leading teachers' discussions to important issues, by drawing on theories of ELT and TEYL to unpack the underlying principles of their teaching behaviours. Also, when engaging in collaborative learning, many teachers still relied on the experts for a 'remedy' or the best solution to the problem embedded in their particular context. This tendency can be explained by the claim that 'the need for dependence' on the more capable or the experts (Hofstede, Hofstede & Minkov 2010, p. 69) might have been established in Vietnamese teachers' minds. Put it simply, in collaborative learning, both peer learning and learning with experts took place and benefited these Vietnamese teachers.

Another particular aspect of collaborative learning in the Vietnamese context resided in its implementation and development. The findings of my study revealed that management by hierarchical institutions, including the Department of Education and Training and schools, who directly supervised teachers' teaching and learning activities, was crucial to developing and implementing collaborative professional learning for these teachers. The DOET and primary schools in the city were aware of the positive nature of the PLCs' activity and provided space and resources for this activity to happen (see the next section for further discussion).

In addition, a number of studies reported that Vietnamese teachers were reluctant to speak openly in public or lack professional dialogues and trust (e.g., Le & Nguyen 2012; Saito & Tsukui 2008) and these issues were also revealed in this study where the PETs participated in the PLCs' activities. Going further than identifying, this research discovered that the teachers' reluctance could be overcome by the leaders' strategic mediation (Wertsch 1985, cited in Johnson 2009) or facilitative mentoring (Smith & Lewis 2015). The teachers in those PLCs tended to contribute more ideas to their community towards the second half of each discussion session. It can be concluded that collaborative learning for Vietnamese teachers would be of full benefit when cultivated and facilitated by the management of the leaders from the Department of Education and Training, relevant schools and leaders of teacher communities.

8.2.3 Contribution to the knowledge of professional learning communities

This study is the first work closely investigating the processes of the PLCs in Thanh Van in Vietnam. It contributes unique insights into the reshaping of the concept of PLCs, originating in Britain, Australasia and North America (BANA countries) (DuFour 2004; Hargreaves 2007; Stoll 2011; Stoll & Louis 2007) to fit that particular context.

On the one hand, the findings of this study confirmed that the PLCs in that context incorporated the important features that PLCs conducted elsewhere have been found to have (e.g., Bolam et al. 2005; Christie et al. 2007; Harris & Jones 2010; Stoll et al. 2006). Specifically, these features included that the PLCs were derived from the PETs' learning needs, promoted a culture of inquiry among the PETs and worked towards collaboration. With these factors, the PLCs can be distinguished from any other gatherings of teachers (Grossman, Wineburg & Woolworth 2001).

On the other hand, this study makes a significant contribution to confirming the claim that practical implications for developing PLCs need to be understood and worked out in their specific settings (Bolam et al. 2005). It was clearly revealed in the research that the BANA concept of PLCs was recontextualised to maximise its benefits to specific groups of Vietnamese teachers. The principle that a PLC needs developing on a natural and voluntary basis (Hargreaves 2007) does not

necessarily work in the context of Thanh Van. It is apparent that although most of the PETs in that city wished to have a community to learn from each other to teach EFL at primary schools, their PLCs were not developed until they were officially established by the DOET. With the management and official approval from the hierarchical institutions, DOET and primary schools, the PETs were provided with supportive structures, including time and space, to professionally interact and learn in their PLC. Also, given that the compulsory nature of the PLCs seems contradictory to the principle of voluntary participation in learning (Brookfield 1986), the study supports the notion that the PLCs' compulsory nature is completely relevant to the context of Thanh Van, where most of the PETs were overloaded with their duties inside and outside school. They had to allocate their limited time for their compulsory professional learning activities.

In addition, the outcomes of this study challenged the notion of distributing leadership among the participants in a PLC as suggested in the literature (Stoll 2011; Stoll et al. 2006; Timperley & Parr 2009; Timperley 2005). This study suggests that leadership in the studied PLCs was exercised in a way specifically relevant to the social, political and cultural features of the Vietnamese context. The ideal of distributing leadership across all the participants in a PLC does not really fit in the Vietnamese context, where a large power distance exists, and senior teachers and leaders are culturally respected (Hofstede 2011; Hofstede, Hofstede & Minkov 2010). In original design, the PLCs were aligned with the beneficial goal to distribute leadership across the participants by assigning the PETs to be the leaders and having all the teachers decide on the learning activities, but this goal was not present in the context of this city. It is clear from the study that formal leadership of the heroic leaders (Camburn, Rowan & Taylor 2003), namely the EFL consultant and the PLCs' leaders, was more important in the PLCs' implementation process. These formal leaders managed the teachers' engagement (see Section 8.2.2 above) and sometimes took on formal leadership in scheduling the PLC's activities which the PETs followed. Distributing leadership in the PLCs would appear to be more of a sensitive issue in developing the PLCs of the PETs in Thanh Van in Vietnam.

Another practical issue in implementing PLCs in the Vietnamese context resides in developing relationships among participants. The findings of this research clearly show that the PLCs involved multi-layered relationships including shared understanding, limited collegiality and hierarchical relationship. Being PETs in the same city, the PLCs' members were likely to understand each other's issues in TEYL within their shared language policies and resources, but many still participated as peripheral participants, had limited trust, and were reluctant to contribute their ideas. It is suggested by the research that when developing collegiality was not a priority, it was harder to have trust among the teachers who came from different schools and did not socially interact much within the time limit of each PLC's meeting. These challenges accord with what Saito and Tsukui (2008) and Cham (2013) found in developing a learning community in other contexts in Vietnam, despite its smaller scope, either within a school or a department. On the other hand, this study significantly explored the notion that the PLCs, involving teachers from different schools and leaders from the DOET, mirrored the participants' external relationships. Often these came down to power relationships between the PETs, the senior PETs and the leader from the Department, whose voices weighed much in the PETs' decisions on how to teach EFL at primary schools. The PETs tended to rely on these leaders' direct advice or suggestions for teaching their particular group of students while working towards self-directing their learning process. From the findings, it can be concluded that complex relationships may be inevitable among the members of a PLC, particularly in communities whose borders expand beyond one school and in a hierarchical society like Vietnam.

This research confirms the possibility that PLCs could become a central form of teacher learning in the Vietnamese context. Distinct from many of the previous studies on experimenting with a collaborative learning activity for a short time for Vietnamese teachers (e.g., Cham 2013; Vo & Nguyen 2010), this study set out to investigate the development and implementation of the PLCs, which had been located as a central form of professional learning for the PETs in a city for an extended period of time. The outcomes of the research revealed that the PLCs were positively operated as an official professional learning activity and created

collaborative learning for the PETS although some challenges were encountered (see Sections 8.2.1 and 8.2.2 above). Therefore, it is recommended that PLCs should not be considered as a fringe of organised teacher learning, but that they be replicated as a central professional learning activity in the Vietnamese context along with other formal activities.

It is clear from the above-mentioned conclusions that this research offers compelling empirical evidence to confirm the benefits of PLCs, which in turn promotes collaborative learning and assists with the implementation of Vietnam's new language policy. Referring to the empirical evidence, further practical recommendations for developing professional learning and PLCs for Vietnamese teachers will be outlined in the next section.

8.3 Recommendations for professional learning practice

Based on the outcomes of this study, I propose the following recommendations for promoting professional learning for Vietnamese PETs in particular and Vietnamese teachers in general and developing PLCs or similar activities in the Vietnamese context.

8.3.1 Promoting professional learning for Vietnamese teachers

Teachers' professional learning is regarded as a keystone of educational policy. Over the past decades, Vietnam has experienced a lot of educational reforms, of which the improvement of teacher quality has been one of the nation's most important focal points. Arising from the findings of this study, three recommendations can be made to maximise the effectiveness of professional learning for Vietnamese teachers, which, in the past, has been disputable in the Vietnamese context.

Firstly, professional learning for Vietnamese teachers needs to be expanded beyond traditional professional development programs, such as workshops or training courses, to include self-directed and inquiry-based learning. The findings of this study strongly support that the Vietnamese PETs benefitted from the PLCs' activities, which were scheduled by the teachers themselves and directly related to

the issues in their day-to-day teaching practice. The PETs were able to construct their knowledge for and of the practice of teaching EFL at primary school and their self-image of a good PET by critically reflecting on their own and the others' teaching. I therefore suggest that professional learning with such a bottom-up approach (Johnson 2006) be integrated into the formal workshops or training courses, which have been so common in Vietnam, and be conducted on a larger scale. The present research shows that regarding teachers as the insiders of their learning process does result in a good outcome. While engaging in their professional learning process, teachers can be encouraged to reflect on their own and others' experiences and to internalise (Johnson & Golombek 2003) what is seen and heard from other teachers as regards the particularities of their students and teaching resources and facilities. By doing that, teachers will be able to engage their sense of plausibility (Prabhu 1990) or an alternative to a teaching method (Kumaravadivelu 2003), which is more appropriate to their particular context in order to make their students' learning happen.

Secondly, promoting a culture of collaborative inquiry is a priority in designing professional learning for Vietnamese teachers. While a small number of previous studies report a lack of collaboration among Vietnamese teachers (Le & Nguyen 2012; Pham 2001; Saito & Tsukui 2008), the outcomes of this study clearly show that collaboration did happen among Vietnamese PETs and played an important part in constructing their knowledge and identity when it was facilitated. The advantages of collaborative learning were also reported in previous studies set in a few other contexts in Vietnam (e.g., Cham 2013; Nguyen 2016; Vo & Nguyen 2010) and in other countries (e.g., Owen 2014; Samimy et al. 2011; Zellermayer & Tabak 2006). The teachers' learning process was mediated through social activities and social interactions that they had had with their colleagues and other relevant people. Thus, I strongly recommend that Vietnamese teachers be provided with more opportunities to professionally interact with their peers, more capable teachers, experts and other relevant people in their professional learning process. Vietnamese teachers need to be aware of the benefits of these social professional interactions in developing their profession. In these interactive learning opportunities, the collective expertise will help to promote individual knowledge

for the teachers and vice versa. Importantly, interactions between teachers and experts would not be merely a transmission of professional knowledge from experts, but become a mediation of learning in which theories of teaching are drawn on by the experts to unpack the underlying principles of specific incidents or issues in teachers' teaching. By that means, teachers will develop not only knowledge for and of practice but also their professional identity, which will likely result in transformations in their teaching.

Furthermore, professional learning activities for Vietnamese teachers need to be conducted on a regular and continuous basis. From a sociocultural perspective, teacher knowledge is unfixed and developed over time and teacher learning is an on-going process (Johnson 2006, 2009; Wallace & Mulholland 2012). It is apparent from this study that the Vietnamese PETs had a strong desire to learn to teach EFL at primary schools given their background of secondary school teachers, and wished the PLC's activities to be conducted more frequently; once a month or every two months, as they used to be, was their preference. The teachers' expectation for an on-going professional learning activity accords with the continuation factor that has been marked as one of the keys to successful professional learning or teacher change in a wide body of literature (e.g., Desimone et al. 2002; Garet et al. 2001; Guskey 2002; Webster-Wright 2009). It was found in this study that the PETs had continuously encountered a lot of issues in their teaching practice, of which many were brought to the PLCs' meetings for a collective resolution. Also their knowledge of teaching EFL learned in university or college was also challenged by what was actually involved in their EFL teaching at primary schools. Hence, it is strongly recommended to have learning activities for Vietnamese teachers on a regular and continuous basis to cater for their learning needs. The on-going activities can be informal learning activities with their colleagues in their school or across schools nearby, such as professional learning communities or critical friends groups. Once established, these informal learning activities have low recurrent costs, but more beneficial to teachers. In these collaborative activities, teachers with a shared repertoire of teaching and learning resources will be able to talk, think and hone the knowledge and skills that they have learned in formal training programs with reference to the particularities of

their practice, as well as to resolve collectively any issues emerging from their teaching.

8.3.2 Developing professional learning communities:

The review of literature that was undertaken for this research showed that Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) or similar activities have been widely used in other countries, arriving relatively recently in Vietnam albeit with a limited scope and with many constraints (Cham 2013; Nguyen 2016; Saito & Tsukui 2008). With reference to the detailed account of the features that the PLCs for the PETs in Thanh Van accommodated, four specific recommendations on how to develop PLCs in similar contexts in Vietnam are suggested.

First of all, it is vital to define a clear goal of developing a learning community or networking. The study clearly shows that the PLCs were highly appreciated by the stakeholders and benefitted the PETs' professional learning because the PLCs were developed for the well-defined purpose of enhancing the PETs' knowledge of TEYL. Relevant to any community, this factor helps to distinguish a learning community with any teacher gatherings (Grossman, Wineburg & Woolworth 2001). Embedded in a clear focus, the members and activities beneficial to that community would be identified. Teachers will therefore find their participation in that community useful and feel more willing to participate.

Secondly, the factor of a formal structure and formal leadership is vital to developing and implementing a PLC or any form of networking in the Vietnamese context. This seems to be contradictory to the principles of voluntary participation for effective practice (Brookfield 1986) and natural development of a PLC (Hargreaves 2007), but the outcomes of this study strongly suggest that it was vital to involve official approval and formal support from the DOET and primary schools in implementing PLCs in the Vietnamese context, where power distance or hierarchy is a feature that needs to be taken into consideration (Hofstede, Hofstede & Minkov 2010). Also, it is clear from the findings that with the formal leadership of the PLCs' leaders and the EFL consultant, the PETs became more engaged in reflective dialogue and contributed more ideas to the community. My recommendation is that Departments and schools need to recognise the positive

nature of the PLCs activity and offer their official support, including space and resources to implement the PLCs' activities. Also, facilitators are required to increase their participants' engagement.

In addition, the issue of distributing leadership needs to be considered in the implementation process of a professional community or networking although it is "a risky business" (Timperley 2005, p. 417). The findings of this research suggest that despite the necessity of formal leadership, a PLC in the Vietnamese context would be an efficient learning site if leadership is distributed among its participants, particularly the teachers. It was found that the PETs led the learning process in the PLCs related to their teaching practice and therefore, benefitted much from their learning. Hence, in developing a PLC, I strongly recommend to assign specific tasks for teachers in managing their learning process by scheduling their learning activities. Teachers themselves know what they need to learn and in what ways their learning can be maximised. It would also be helpful to raise teachers' awareness of their active role in leading their learning community, which can be particularly emphasised throughout the implementation process of a PLC.

Last but not least, collegiality or trust among teachers needs promoting in a learning community or in networking. As revealed in this research, collegiality or trust among the PETs had not been sufficiently developed so that their sharing was not always open and frank. However, when developing collegiality was prioritised in the PLCs' activities, teachers became more engaged. This is consistent with what was found in teachers' collaborative professional learning in other contexts, in Vietnam and elsewhere (e.g., Katz & Earl 2010; Le & Nguyen 2012). Possible causes for limited trust among the PETs in this study were time constraints. The frequency and length of their meetings were limited while the size of the community was large. Thus, I suggest that developing collegiality among teachers be a priority in implementing PLCs' activities. The PLCs' activities need to be held regularly and each PLC should have a maximum number of fifteen teachers. This would allow more time and space for social and professional interactions among the teachers with a shared repertoire of teaching resources and policies. It might be too idealistic to expect all the participants in a community to become critical friends, but it is important for them to become legitimate participants. They would

definitely consider their PLC a safe environment to share their knowledge, teaching experience and concerns, and therefore likely to gain more from their peers' sharing.

Regarding the above-discussed recommendations in developing and implementing PLCs in the Vietnamese context, PLCs could be developed as a central form of professional learning for Vietnamese teachers, which may be held alongside other formal activities in order to maximise their benefits. However, these changes would have to fit within the possibilities and constraints of Departments and schools where the professional learning programs are carried out.

8.4 Limitations of the study

Two main limitations were identified in conducting this study. The first limitation is that it was a case study conducted in a single setting with a small number of participants. For the principle of 'judicious balance' or 'opportunism' in defining the case for a study (Holliday 2007, p. 8) and for the sake of data management, this study was confined to a small number of PLCs and PETs in Thanh Van. Therefore, as discussed in the Methodology chapter, the issue of generalisability or transferability might arise. However, this study was conducted in a way that allowed for possible transferability in other similar situations. It provided a rich and thick description of the data on the PLCs' operations and PETs' learning, which were collected from multiple sources. The conclusions on the PLCs' implementation process and the PETs' learning were carefully drawn from different perspectives. The findings and implications are of a suggestive nature, rather than being evaluative or conclusive.

The second limitation lies in the inconclusive evidence on the association between PLCs and PETs' transformations in teaching. Two possible causes of this limitation can be explained as follows.

The claims for PETs' learning in their PLC came from my analysis of the observational and interview data of teachers' learning process. As explained in the Methodology chapter, in conjunction with observation, interview was designed as an optimal tool to enable me as a researcher to uncover teachers' learning

experiences that they had withheld due to their reluctance to speak openly. However, drawing the data from these two sources might not provide adequate evidence to uncover the complex nature of teacher learning. Observational data could be hindered by the possibility that the participants in the PLCs' meetings might have changed their behaviours due to my overt observation (see Chapter 4), and as an insider researcher, I may not be completely neutral in interpreting their behaviours. Also, the interviews with participants were not scheduled straight after the PLC's meetings I observed, so the participants may not have recalled all the learning experiences that they had had. Furthermore, tracking teachers' learning through interview data may have failed to discover what teachers 'know but cannot tell' or their 'tacit knowledge' (Polanyi 1967, cited in Eraut 2000, p. 118). They were likely to develop tacit knowledge of being a PET when observing other teachers and hearing other teachers talking about their learning in their PLC and that may have influenced their teaching performance.

The second possible cause for inconclusive evidence on the PETs' learning and transformation was the limited scope of my study. By the time the data were collected for this study, the PLCs for the PETs in the city had been conducted for more than six years. As revealed in the interview data collected for this study, some of the PETs had participated in other activities, including formal workshops or training courses, or informal ones such as peer observation, professional chats with colleagues, or self-learning with reference materials or critical friends outside the PLCs. The interviewed teachers acknowledged that they learned some strategies of TEYL from these informal learning experiences. However, within the scope of this study, I was not able to cover these other professional learning activities to discern their possible impacts on knowledge construction and transformations in teaching. Therefore, any claims about the relationship between PETs' participating in PLCs and their transformations may not be persuasive.

8.5 Recommendations for further research:

This study provides a strong foundation for any further research in this field. It set out to investigate the operations of PLCs as learning sites for PETs in Thanh Van in Vietnam and obtained great insights on the recontextualisation of the BANA

concept of PLCs and their affordances for teacher learning. This study might not have covered all aspects relating to the implementation of PLCs and teacher learning. I therefore propose suggestions for further research on professional learning for Vietnamese teachers, particularly for Vietnamese PETs and research on PLCs in other parts of Vietnam.

(1) This study did extensive work in the area of teachers' needs for their professional learning. It also highlighted that further information could be gathered about the practice of TEYL learning in Thanh Van, which is likely to be influenced by the development of the PLCs. Following from this study, an investigation of how EFL is being taught and learnt at primary schools in Thanh Van would be logical and useful follow-up research. The practice of teaching English language at public primary schools in Northern Vietnam (Le & Do 2012; Nguyen 2011) and in a Southern rural area (Nguyen 2012b) has been reported to be adult-oriented and too form-focused. It was argued that the negative situation of TEYL in these areas was mostly due to the PETs' lack of access to professional learning opportunities. The teachers would have provided better EFL teaching to their primary school students if they had engaged more in efficient and productive professional learning activities. Therefore, a further study on teaching English language at primary schools in Thanh Van can provide empirical evidence to examine the long-term impacts of a professional learning activity, called PLCs, on the practice of EFL teaching and learning.

(2) An additional area of research is a longitudinal investigation of a small number of teachers learning in PLCs to trace their changes in teaching practice, in professional identity and/or in their students' learning outcomes. A longitudinal study of this kind could make an evidence-based contribution to the interrelationships between PLCs' engagement and teachers' transformations. The longitudinal study could be conducted either with newly-developed PLCs and teachers having their first experience in PLCs, or with established PLCs such as the ones in this study and young teachers having their first experience in PLCs. Also, other professional learning activities in which the teachers participate need to be taken into account in making claims about the interrelationships between learning and teaching.

(3) The field of discourse analysis offers educational researchers an opportunity to explore levels of teachers' engagement, complexity of power relationships or participant' learning attitudes through the PLCs' participants' professional language. I left these aspects out of my analysis of the PETs' learning from a sociocultural perspective, which focused on teacher's social experiences and the integration of other possible factors in their learning process.

(4) A multiple-case study could be conducted to compare and contrast the aspects of implementation of PLCs and teachers' learning in different settings. The PLCs in Thanh Van or PLCs in different parts of Vietnam could be single cases. Based on analysis of the data on the PLCs and teachers' learning in each of the single cases, a multiple-case study could uncover the impacts of sociocultural features of a distinctive context on the implementation of PLCs and their teachers' learning. Specific practical implications for developing PLCs would thereby be proposed.

8.6 Concluding thoughts

Professional learning communities or other similar collaborative learning activities have been widely used and proved to be beneficial to teachers' growth in Britain, Australasia and North America (BANA countries), but have only recently landed in Vietnam, and their outcomes are ambivalent in a limited body of previous studies. This study set out to investigate the implementation of PLCs' activities and their affordances for professional learning of PETs in Thanh Van, who have a pressing need to learn to teach EFL from their training background of secondary school EFL teachers. Despite being conducted as a single case study involving a small number of participants from a city in Vietnam, this study makes significant contributions to the knowledge of professional learning for Vietnamese PETs in particular and for Vietnamese teachers in general, and to the knowledge of developing and implementing PLCs in a context outside BANA countries, specifically in Thanh Van. My analysis of the PLCs' implementation and the PETs' learning process strongly suggests that the PLCs have been recontextualised to cater for its specific sociocultural features and the learning needs of a specific group of teachers. Characterised as the nature of human learning (Rogoff 2003; Vygotsky 1978), collaborative or socially mediated learning, is completely applicable to Vietnamese

PETs' professional learning. However, their collaborative learning will only be productive if it meets teachers' learning needs and is facilitated and supported by management of hierarchical institutions, namely the Department of Education and Training and relevant schools.

Appendices

Appendix A: Schedule of the observed PLCs' meetings

PLCs' meetings	Time, location	Participants	Activities
1. A1	Jan 24 th , 2013 (3 rd meeting)* Primary school 1	22 teachers (Ts) + EFL consultant	a. Type: Demonstration lesson and discussion b. Topic: teaching a story c. Textbook: Family and Friends 3 d. Grade: Year 3
2. A2	Nov 7 th , 2013 (1 st meeting) Primary school 2	17Ts + EFL consultant	a. Type: Demonstration lesson and discussion b. Topic: structure lesson c. Textbook: English 3 (Tiếng Anh 3) d. Grade: Year 3
3. A3	Jan 2 nd , 2014 (2 nd meeting) Primary school 3	16 Ts	a. Type: micro-teachings+ discussion b. Topic: Using games c. Textbook: not specified d. Grade: not specified
4. B1	Jan 13 th , 2013 (1 st meeting) Primary school 4	18 Ts	a. Type: Demonstration lesson and discussion b. Topic: Let's learn (new structure) c. Textbook: Let's Go 2A d. Grade: Year 5
5. B2	Dec 14 th 2013 (1 st meeting) Primary school 5	17Ts+ EFL consultant	a. Type: Demonstration lesson and discussion b. Topic: Shared Reading c. Textbook: English 4 (Tiếng Anh 4) d. Grade: Year 4
6. C1	Jan 17 th 2013 (2 nd meeting) Primary school 6	24Ts + EFL consultant	a. Type: Demonstration lesson and discussion b. Topic: Teaching a song c. Textbook: Family and Friends 3 d. Grade: Year 3
7. C2	Nov 13 th 2013 (1 st meeting) Primary school 7	24Ts + EFL consultant	a. Type: Demonstration lesson and discussion b. Topic: Shared Reading c. Textbook: Family and Friends 3 d. Grade: Year 3
8. C3	Dec 12 th 2013 (2 nd meeting) Primary school 8	25Ts	a. Type: Demonstration lesson and discussion b. Topic: teaching new structure c. Textbook: First Friends d. Grade: Year 2
9. D1	Jan 23 rd , 2013 (2 nd meeting)	18 Ts	a. Type: Demonstration lesson and discussion

	Primary school 9		b. Topic: Let's learn (new structure) c. Textbook: Let's Go 2A d. Grade: Year 5
10. D2	Nov 29 th 2013 (3 rd meeting) Primary school 10	16 Ts + EFL consultant	a. Type: Demonstration lesson and discussion b. Topic: teaching Phonics c. Textbook: Family and Friends 3 d. Grade: Year 3

(*): the ordinal number of the meetings conducted in a PLC in one academic year.

Textbooks used in the demonstration lessons:

Do, T.N.H., Nguyen, S.H., Dao, N.L., Truong, T.N.M., Nguyen, Q.T., Gillespie, C. & Heron, C. 2011, *English 3 - Volume 1 (Tiếng Anh 3 - Tập 1)*, Vietnam Educational Publishing House, Hanoi.

Iannuzzi, S. 2011, *First friends. Grade 2. Activity book*, Oxford University Press, Oxford.

Nakata, R., Frazier, K., Hoskins, B., Wilkinson, S. & Graham, C. 2000, *Let's go 2A. Student book / work book*, 2 edn, Oxford University Press, Oxford.

Phan, H., Do, T.N.H., Nguyen, S.H., Dao, N.L. & Truong, T.N.M. 2012, *English 4 - Volume 1 (Tiếng Anh 4 - Tập 1)*, 2nd edn, Vietnam Educational Publishing House, Hanoi.

Simmons, N. 2011, *Family and friends. Grade 3. Class book*, Oxford University Press, Oxford.

Appendix B: Interview questions

For the EFL consultant

- a. When were the professional learning communities (PLCs) developed as learning sites for the primary school EFL teachers (PETs) in this city? Why?
- b. In what ways do you involve in developing and implementing the PLCs?
- c. As a leader from the Department, have you had any challenges in facilitating the PLCs? If so, what are they? What did you do to overcome?
- d. From your perspective of an advisor and supervisor of teaching EFL at primary schools in the city, in what ways have the PLCs benefitted the PETs?
- e. Should the PLCs be maintained as learning sites for the PETs in the city in the next years?

For the PLCs' leaders

- a. How long have you worked as a leader of the PLC?
- b. What are the most common activities conducted in the PLCs? Why were these activities selected?
- c. As a leader of a PLC, have you had any challenges in organizing and facilitating the PLC's activities? If so, what are they? What did you do to overcome?
- d. What can you say about the PETs' participation in the PLCs?
- e. From your perspective of being PLC leader and PET, in what ways have the PLCs benefitted the PETs?
- f. Should the PLCs activity be maintained as learning sites for the PETs in the city in the next years?

For the PETs

Fieldwork 1

PETs' background

- a. What degree(s) of English language teaching do you have? When did you receive it or them?
- b. When did you start teaching English language at primary school?

PETs' experience in PLCs

- a. When did you first attend the PLC's activities?
- b. How often do you attend the PLC's activities?
- c. What activities are often held in your PLC?
- d. What did you do as a member of your PLC?
- e. Did you use any teaching techniques or activities that you learned in the PLC in your EFL lessons?
- f. How do you value your learning experience in the PLCs? What suggestions do you have to improve the PLC?

Fieldwork 2

- a. Do you think you have had a successful lesson today? Why or why not? // what do you like most about your lesson today?
- b. In this lesson, did you use any teaching techniques or strategies that you have learned from the PLCs that you have participated?
- c. Are there any other techniques or strategies that you learned from the PLC's activities, but did not use in your lesson today?
- d. In what ways has your learning experience in the PLCs helped you to become an EFL teacher at primary school?
- e. Are you willing to contribute your ideas to the community in each meeting? Why or why not?
- f. Should the PLCs be maintained as learning sites for the PETs in the city in the next years? Why? What suggestions do you have to improve the PLCs?

Appendix C: Data collection Schedule

Participants - Pseudonyms	Fieldwork 1: January 2013 - February 2013	Fieldwork 2: October 2013 - March 2014
1. PLC-A	01 Observation (Meeting A1)	2 Observations (Meetings A2, A3)
2. PLC-B	01 Observation (Meeting B1)	01 Observation (Meeting B2)
3. PLC-C	01 Observation (Meeting C1)	02 Observations (Meeting C2, C3)
4. PLC-D	01 Observation (Meeting D1)	01 Observation (Meeting D2)
5. EFL consultant	01 Interview	
6. Leader of PLC-A	01 Interview	
7. Leader of PLC-B	01 Interview	
8. Leader of PLC-C	01 Interview	
9. Teacher Thanh	01 Interview	02 Interviews
10. Teacher Trang	01 Interview	02 Interviews
11. Teacher Nga	01 Interview	01 Interview
12. Teacher Anh	01 Interview	02 Interviews
13. Teacher Lai	01 Interview	02 Interviews
14. Teacher Thuy	01 Interview	02 Interviews
15. Teach Dung	01 Interview	02 Interviews

Appendix D: Information sheets for participants



INFORMATION SHEET (for EFL Consultant)

Project title: *Professional Learning Communities: Learning Sites for Primary School English Language Teachers in Vietnam* (Ref. No.: UTS HREC REF NO. 2012-447A)

WHO IS DOING THE RESEARCH?

My name is Phan, Quynh Nhu and I am a PhD student at UTS. My supervisors are Dr Jacquie Widin and A/Prof. Liam Morgan.

WHAT IS THIS RESEARCH ABOUT?

This research aims to investigate how professional learning communities could become a sustainable professional development activity for primary in-service teachers of English as a foreign language (EFL). In addition, the research attempts to examine how the teachers are learning to teach in their professional learning communities by integrating the particular needs and demands of their teaching context into their learning.

IF I SAY YES, WHAT WILL IT INVOLVE?

I would like to have a talk with you about the teachers' professional development, in particular the implementation of the professional learning communities for primary EFL teachers. The interview will be audio-recorded. In addition, I would like to access some documents recording the professional activities for the teachers over the last two years and in the future.

ARE THERE ANY RISKS/INCONVENIENCE?

There are very few risks because the research has been carefully designed. However, it is possible that you may feel uncomfortable when sharing the documents and records of the Department and teachers and being audio-recorded in the interview. To ensure that you will not be identified when the research is published, I will use pseudonyms to de-identify all of the participants and research sites.

WHY HAVE I BEEN ASKED?

You are able to give me the information I need to find out about the strategies and plans of developing primary English teachers from the perspective of a leader and organisation.

DO I HAVE TO SAY YES?

You don't have to say yes.

WHAT WILL HAPPEN IF I SAY NO?

Nothing. I will thank you for your time so far and won't contact you about this research again.

IF I SAY YES, CAN I CHANGE MY MIND LATER?

You can change your mind and withdraw from the research at any time until the data are de-identified and you don't have to say why. I will thank you for your time so far and won't contact you about this research again.

WHAT IF I HAVE CONCERNS OR A COMPLAINT?

If you have concerns about the research that you think I or my supervisor can help you with, please feel free to contact me (us) on nhu.q.phan@student.edu.au or jacquie.widin@uts.edu.au.

If you would like to talk to someone who is not connected with the research, you may contact the Research Ethics Officer on 02 9514 9772, and quote this number UTS HREC REF NO. 2012-447A.

**INFORMATION SHEET
(for PLCs' Leaders)**

Project title: *Professional Learning Communities: Learning Sites for Primary School English Language Teachers in Vietnam* (Ref. No.: UTS HREC REF NO. 2012-447A)

WHO IS DOING THE RESEARCH?

My name is Phan, Quynh Nhu and I am a PhD student at UTS. My supervisors are Dr Jacquie Widin and A/Prof. Liam Morgan.

WHAT IS THIS RESEARCH ABOUT?

This research aims to investigate how professional learning communities could become a sustainable professional development activity for primary in-service teachers of English as a foreign language (EFL). In addition, the research attempts to examine how the teachers are learning to teach in their professional learning communities by integrating the particular needs and demands of their teaching context into their learning.

IF I SAY YES, WHAT WILL IT INVOLVE?

I would like to have a talk with you about the Department's plan and professional development activities for primary EFL teachers and your experiences in organising the professional learning activities of your community. The interview will be audio-recorded.

ARE THERE ANY RISKS/INCONVENIENCE?

There are very few risks because the research has been carefully designed. However, it is possible that you may feel uncomfortable when sharing your experience and opinions and being audio-recorded in the interview. To ensure that you will not be identified when the research is published, I will use pseudonyms to de-identify all of the participants and research sites.

WHY HAVE I BEEN ASKED?

You directly plan and moderate the activities in your communities; therefore, you are able to provide me with the information I need to find out about the plans and experiences in organising the activities of the professional learning community.

DO I HAVE TO SAY YES?

You don't have to say yes.

WHAT WILL HAPPEN IF I SAY NO?

Nothing. I will thank you for your time so far and won't contact you about this research again.

IF I SAY YES, CAN I CHANGE MY MIND LATER?

You can change your mind and withdraw from the research at any time until the data are de-identified and you don't have to say why. I will thank you for your time so far and won't contact you about this research again.

WHAT IF I HAVE CONCERNS OR A COMPLAINT?

If you have concerns about the research that you think I or my supervisor can help you with, please feel free to contact me (us) on nhu.q.phan@student.edu.au or Jacquie.widin@uts.edu.au.

If you would like to talk to someone who is not connected with the research, you may contact the Research Ethics Officer on 02 9514 9772, and quote this number UTS HREC REF NO. 2012-447A.



**INFORMATION SHEET
(for Teachers as a group)**

Project title: *Professional Learning Communities: Learning Sites for Primary School English Language Teachers in Vietnam* (Ref. No.: UTS HREC REF NO. 2012-447A)

WHO IS DOING THE RESEARCH?

My name is Phan, Quynh Nhu and I am a PhD student at UTS. My supervisors are Dr Jacquie Widin and A/Prof. Liam Morgan.

WHAT IS THIS RESEARCH ABOUT?

This research aims to investigate how professional learning communities could become a sustainable professional development activity for primary in-service teachers of English as a foreign language (EFL). In addition, the research attempts to examine how the teachers are learning to teach in their professional learning communities by integrating the particular needs and demands of their teaching context into their learning.

IF I SAY YES, WHAT WILL IT INVOLVE?

I will ask you to let me observe you in your group's meetings (4 meetings). The observations will be note-taken and audio-recorded.

ARE THERE ANY RISKS/INCONVENIENCE?

There are very few risks because the research has been carefully designed. However, it is possible that you may feel uncomfortable when being observed and audio-recorded. I hope that your feelings will be faded as soon as you get to know me, be familiar with my presence in the meetings and learn that you are free of being judged. Also, I understand that you may be afraid of being identified when the research is published. However, I will use pseudonyms to de-identify all of the participants and research sites.

WHY HAVE I BEEN ASKED?

You are the members of the communities and the teachers teaching English at primary schools.

DO I HAVE TO SAY YES?

You don't have to say yes.

WHAT WILL HAPPEN IF I SAY NO?

Nothing. I will thank you for your time so far and will exclude you off the data I have collected from the community observation.

IF I SAY YES, CAN I CHANGE MY MIND LATER?

You can change your mind and withdraw from the research at any time until the data are de-identified and you don't have to say why. I will thank you for your time so far and won't contact you about this research again.

WHAT IF I HAVE CONCERNS OR A COMPLAINT?

If you have concerns about the research that you think I or my supervisor can help you with, please feel free to contact me (us) on nhu.q.phan@student.edu.au or Jacquie.widin@uts.edu.au.

If you would like to talk to someone who is not connected with the research, you may contact the Research Ethics Officer on 02 9514 9772, and quote this number UTS HREC REF NO. 2012-447A.

**INFORMATION SHEET
(for Individual Teachers)**

Project title: *Professional Learning Communities: Learning Sites for Primary School English Language Teachers in Vietnam* (Ref. No.: UTS HREC REF NO. 2012-447A)

WHO IS DOING THE RESEARCH?

My name is Phan, Quynh Nhu and I am a PhD student at UTS. My supervisors are Dr Jacquie Widin and A/Prof. Liam Morgan.

WHAT IS THIS RESEARCH ABOUT?

This research aims to investigate how professional learning communities (PLCs) could become a sustainable professional development activity for primary in-service teachers of English as a foreign language (EFL). In addition, the research attempts to examine how the teachers are learning to teach in their professional learning communities by integrating the particular needs and demands of their teaching context into their learning.

IF I SAY YES, WHAT WILL IT INVOLVE?

I will ask you to let me observe you in your community's meetings (4 meetings) and interview you after the meetings about your training background and experience in the PLC. In the second phase of this study, I will ask you to let me observe your English lessons (2-3 lessons) at your primary school. The observations and interviews will be note-taken and audio-recorded. After each lesson, you will be asked to ask about your experience in participating in the PLC's activities and knowledge or skills that you can learn and apply to your teaching.

ARE THERE ANY RISKS/INCONVENIENCE?

There are very few risks because the research has been carefully designed. However, it is possible that you may feel uncomfortable when being observed and audio-recorded, sharing your personal experience and opinions and allocating time for observations and interviews. Nevertheless, for your convenience, you could suggest what lessons should be observed and when to be interviewed. Also, to ensure that you will not be identified when the research is published, I will use pseudonyms to de-identify all of the participants and research sites.

WHY HAVE I BEEN ASKED?

You are the members of the communities and the teachers teaching English at primary schools. No one else rather than you can give me the information I need to find out how and what a teacher could develop professionally in the communities and in teaching.

DO I HAVE TO SAY YES?

You don't have to say yes.

WHAT WILL HAPPEN IF I SAY NO?

Nothing. I will thank you for your time so far and won't contact you about this research again.

IF I SAY YES, CAN I CHANGE MY MIND LATER?

You can change your mind and withdraw from the research at any time until the data are de-identified and you don't have to say why. I will thank you for your time so far and won't contact you about this research again.

WHAT IF I HAVE CONCERNS OR A COMPLAINT?

If you have concerns about the research that you think I or my supervisor can help you with, please feel free to contact me (us) on nhu.q.phan@student.edu.au or Jacquie.widin@uts.edu.au.

If you would like to talk to someone who is not connected with the research, you may contact the Research Ethics Officer on 02 9514 9772, and quote this number: UTS HREC REF NO. 2012-447A.

**CONSENT FORM
(for PLC Leader)**

I, _____, agree to participate in the research project *Professional Learning Communities: Learning Sites for Primary School English Language Teachers in Vietnam* (Ref. No.: UTS HREC REF NO. 2012-447A) being conducted by PHAN, QUYNH NHU, a doctoral student at Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, University of Technology, Sydney for her doctoral degree.

I understand that the purpose of this study is to understand how professional learning community is adopted as a sustainable model of developing primary English teachers and how the teachers learn in their professional learning communities to meet the demands of teaching English at primary schools as required by Vietnam Ministry of Education and Training.

I understand that I have been asked to participate in this research because I am the leader of the professional learning communities for primary English teachers in city, who plans and moderates the activities of the communities. My participation in this research will involve:

- Being observed in the PLC's activities
- Being interviewed (30 minutes, audio-recorded) about the implementation of the professional learning community model for primary English teachers.

I understand that I might feel uncomfortable or inconvenient to provide the relevant documents and to be interviewed (audio-recorded). However, my feelings will be very minor as I have been well informed of the research objectives and plan. Additionally, the information of the bureau and myself will be de-identified by pseudonyms in the research publications and the raw data will be accessed only by the researcher and her supervisors.

I am aware that I can contact Ms Phan, Quynh Nhu or her supervisors, Dr Jacquie Widin at +61 2 9514 3744 / Jacquie.Widin@uts.edu.au and Associate Professor Liam Morgan at +61 2 9514 3871 / Liam.Morgan@uts.edu.au. if I have any concerns about the research. I could contact a local person, Dr Pham, Thi Hong Nhung at +84 54 3846862 / nhungpham@yahoo.com to confirm the researcher's identity and express any concerns.

I also understand that I am free to withdraw my participation from this research project at any time I wish, without consequences, and without giving a reason up until the data is de-identified. My withdrawal from the research will not prejudice my work performance.

I agree that Ms Phan, Quynh Nhu has answered all my questions fully and clearly.

I agree that the research data gathered from this project may be published in a form that does not identify me in any way.

_____/_____/_____
Signature (participant)

_____/_____/_____
Signature (researcher or delegate)

NOTE:

This study has been approved by the University of Technology, Sydney Human Research Ethics Committee. If you have any complaints or reservations about any aspect of your participation in this research which you cannot resolve with the researcher, you may contact the Ethics Committee through the Research Ethics Officer (ph: +61 2 9514 9772 Research.Ethics@uts.edu.au) and quote the UTS HREC reference number. Any complaint you make will be treated in confidence and investigated fully and you will be informed of the outcome.

**CONSENT FORM
(for Individual Teachers)**

I, _____, agree to participate in the research project *Professional Learning Communities: Learning Sites for Primary School English Language Teachers in Vietnam* (Ref. No.: UTS HREC REF NO. 2012-447A) being conducted by PHAN, QUYNH NHU, a doctoral student at Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, University of Technology, Sydney for her doctoral degree.

I understand that the purpose of this study is to understand how professional learning community is adopted as a sustainable model of developing primary English teachers and how the teachers learn in their professional learning communities to meet the demands of teaching English at primary schools as required by Vietnam Ministry of Education and Training.

I understand that I have been asked to participate in this research because I am a primary English teacher who has participated in the learning communities organised by the Department of Education and Training in city and that my participation in this research will involve:

- Being observed and audio-recorded at the communities' meetings and interviewed (20 minutes - audio-recorded) after the meeting in the first phase of the study.
- Being observed in my 2 or 3 English lessons and interviewed after each observed lesson in the second phase of the study.

I can decide on time for the lesson's observations and interviews.

I understand that participating in this research, I might feel uncomfortable to be observed and interviewed or inconvenienced to allocate my time for interviews and journals. However, I understand that my feelings will be faded as getting to better know the researcher, being used to her presence in the meetings and my classes and learning that I am free of judgment. I have been well informed of the research plan, so I will be able to allocate my time for my convenience. Additionally, my identities and personal information will be kept completely confidential by using pseudonyms. The raw data will be accessed only by the researcher and her supervisors.

I am aware that I can contact Ms Phan, Quynh Nhu or her supervisors, Dr Jacquie Widin at +61 2 9514 3744 / Jacquie.Widin@uts.edu.au and Associate Professor Liam Morgan at +61 2 9514 3871 / Liam.Morgan@uts.edu.au. if I have any concerns about the research. Also, I could contact a local person, Dr Pham, Thi Hong Nhung at +84 54 3846862 / nhungpham@yahoo.com to confirm the researcher's identity and express any concerns.

I also understand that I am free to withdraw my participation from this research project at any time I wish, without consequences, and without giving a reason up until the data is de-identified. My withdrawal from the research will not prejudice my work performance.

I agree that Ms Phan, Quynh Nhu has answered all my questions fully and clearly.

I agree that the research data gathered from this project may be published in a form that does not identify me in any way.

Signature (participant)

___/___/___

Signature (researcher or delegate)

___/___/___

NOTE:

This study has been approved by the University of Technology, Sydney Human Research Ethics Committee. If you have any complaints or reservations about any aspect of your participation in this research which you cannot resolve with the researcher, you may contact the Ethics Committee through the Research Ethics Officer (ph: +61 2 9514 9772 Research.Ethics@uts.edu.au) and quote the UTS HREC reference number. Any complaint you make will be treated in confidence and investigated fully and you will be informed of the outcome.

Appendix F: Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR): Learning, Teaching, Assessment

Common Reference Levels: global scale

Proficient user	C2	Can understand with ease virtually everything heard or read. Can summarise information from different spoken and written sources, reconstructing arguments and accounts in a coherent presentation. Can express him/herself spontaneously, very fluently and precisely, differentiating finer shades of meaning even in more complex situations.
	C1	Can understand a wide range of demanding, longer texts, and recognise implicit meaning. Can express him/herself fluently and spontaneously without much obvious searching for expressions. Can use language flexibly and effectively for social, academic and professional purposes. Can produce clear, well-structured, detailed text on complex subjects, showing controlled use of organisational patterns, connectors and cohesive devices.
Independent user	B2	Can understand the main ideas of complex text on both concrete and abstract topics, including technical discussions in his/her field of specialisation. Can interact with a degree of fluency and spontaneity that makes regular interaction with native speakers quite possible without strain for either party. Can produce clear, detailed text on a wide range of subjects and explain a viewpoint on a topical issue giving the advantages and disadvantages of various options.
	B1	Can understand the main points of clear standard input on familiar matters regularly encountered in work, school, leisure, etc. Can deal with most situations likely to arise whilst travelling in an area where the language is spoken. Can produce simple connected text on topics which are familiar or of personal interest. Can describe experiences and events, dreams, hopes and ambitions and briefly give reasons and explanations for opinions and plans.
Basic user	A2	Can understand sentences and frequently used expressions related to areas of most immediate relevance (e.g. very basic personal and family information, shopping, local geography, employment). Can communicate in simple and routine tasks requiring a simple and direct exchange of information on familiar and routine matters. Can describe in simple terms aspects of his/her background, immediate environment and matters in areas of immediate need.
	A1	Can understand and use familiar everyday expressions and very basic phrases aimed at the satisfaction of needs of a concrete type. Can introduce him/herself and others and can ask and answer questions about personal details such as where he/she lives, people he/she knows and things he/she has. Can interact in a simple way provided the other person talks slowly and clearly and is prepared to help.

(Taken from Council of Europe 2001, *Common European framework of reference for languages: learning, teaching, assessment*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.)

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